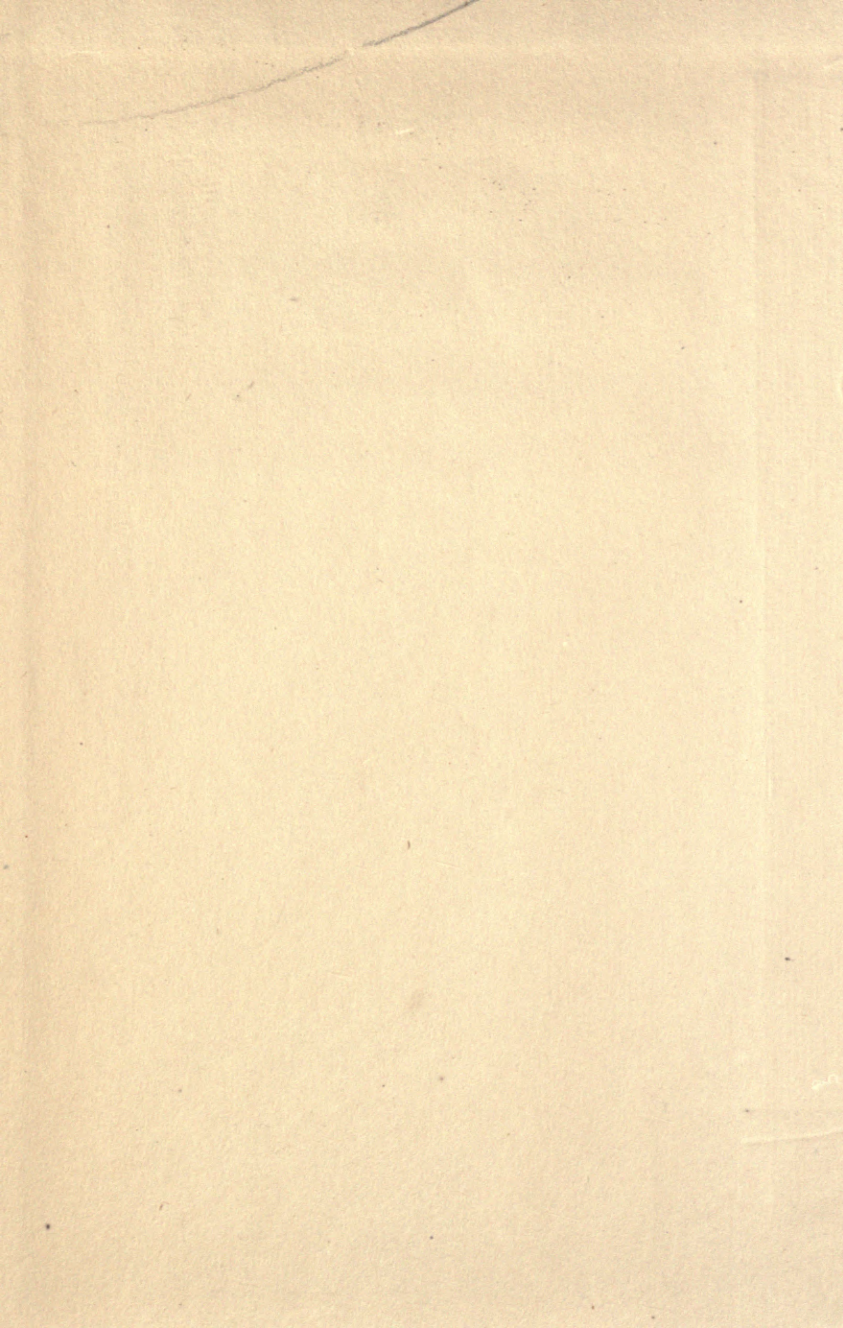


THE
GRAY ANGELS

NALBRO BARTLEY



THE GRAY ANGELS

THE GRAY ANGELS

BY

NALBRO BARTLEY

Author of "A Woman's Woman,"
"Paradise Auction," etc.



BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1920,
By SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
(INCORPORATED)

THE GRAY ANGELS

CHAPTER I

The younger generation of Birge's Corners insisted that nothing exciting had happened since Abigail Clergy's love affair in 1867, and the older generation retorted that Thurley Precore, who must have been born in Arcadia, was bound to create excitement.

The older generation were content to have time snail over their doorsteps. To their placid minds much had happened and was happening to content any one of normal makeup. Take the Hotel Button — what more did any one want than that two-story establishment with ramshackle outbuildings and a crazy wooden fence about the whole of it? Commercial travellers making the town annually never complained about Prince Hawkins' hospitality or Mrs. Prince Hawkins' cooking — never. And during one of those comical cold spells, when twenty below zero was registered on the thermometer, the younger generation were mighty glad to end a sleigh ride before the Hotel Button, and have one of Mrs. Prince Hawkins' oyster suppers — she had been Lena Button, an only child, and her working like a slave now . . . ! Also, the upstairs parlor with its flowered carpet and tortured walnut furniture and the same square piano on which Lena Button had learned her "Battle of Prague" — the younger generation never thought of refusing the upstairs parlor in which to have a wind-up dance. None of them complained about the slowness of Birge's Corners — until the next day!

THE GRAY ANGELS

As for stores: there was Oyster Jim's confectionery store with a balcony overlooking Lake Birge, and here the younger generation gathered to eat ice cream and drink cream soda. Of course, Oyster Jim's store was not like New York tea-rooms which some of the younger generation had visited and drawn unkind comparisons about, but the ice cream was homemade, and, if he did dilute the cream, the water from Lake Birge was about as good as there was in the state; a chemist had said so. Besides, Oyster Jim's other specialty was canary birds, yellow-throated songsters in every corner of the balcony, and it took a pretty smart man to keep an ice cream store and raise canary birds, to say nothing of selling Ford supplies to distressed tourists! Then there was Submit Curler's general store. She was always taking magazines to keep "up to snuff"—and as for patterns of gingham and calicos, there were no prettier patterns to be had. When the younger generation said *why* did Miss Curler insist on selling horse whips and lanterns and year-old hard candies and marbles and soft soap and acorn picture frames and knitted things she made in between rings of the bell, and why didn't she have decent silk waists and neckties and stop calling you by your first name long after your engagement had been announced, to say nothing of wrapping things in newspapers and expecting you to carry them through the streets—the older generation sniffed in answer that Submit Curler was one of God's own, and, although Algebra might have been the capital of a foreign country as far as she knew, she had crooned countless teething babies to sleep to give their mothers a rest, and helped lay out the dead and then stayed "behind" to have a piping hot dinner ready when the mourners "came back."

Of course the younger generation were not silenced by

THE GRAY ANGELS

this. They began a complaint about the weekly paper, a ridiculous affair running three-year-old detective serials and month-old national happenings, telling whose veranda was to be painted and who had bought a pair of new ear-laps! To which the older generation magnanimously remarked that, as long as "Ali Baba" and Betsey Pilrig had their health, there would be no need for an up-to-date daily newspaper. One did not have to wait until news was gathered, edited and printed. Ali Baba, Abby Clergy's coachman, and Betsey Pilrig, who lived in the yellow house across from Thurley Precore's box-car wagon, kept the village informed of every happening in such rapid-fire fashion that the need for a daily sheet was never experienced!

Granting this — where was there any society? To which the older generation answered, indignantly, that nowhere in the United States of America HAD there existed such society, elegance and grandeur as at the summer colony on Birge's Lake, and, if those days were contemporary with Abigail Clergy's great sorrow, what mattered it? The aroma of past grandeur lingers long, and even yet the stately mansions with endless turrets and towers stood about the shores of the lake causing one to respect their closed shutters.

To this the younger generation, although protesting that the society was entirely a memory, had no reply. For the older generation had spoken the truth. About the perfect little lake, an emerald in its coloring and flanked by pungent pine woods and an amphitheater of tiny hills, some half a century before, had been built the summer homes of the oldest of America's aristocracy. In those days when Birge's Corners was but a post office and a few stray dogs, the lake had been an oasis for the tired rich; here families came to grow tanned

THE GRAY ANGELS

and rosy, while love affairs ripened and wedding bells were listened for and the elders sat back in pleased approval. The rich owned the lake, so the saying went—but Daniel Birge owned the Corners and the rich! Daniel Birge was steward to the rich. If they desired an improvement in the way of carriage sheds or certain grades of merchandise which were daily necessities, Daniel Birge, founder of Birge's Corners, saw to it that it was accomplished. The lake had been named for his great-great-grandfather, who discovered it, and, when the richest of the rich suggested that "Birge's Lake" was a trifle commonplace name for such a bit of paradise—"Fairy Lake" would be more appropriate—they met their Waterloo. This was the only thing Daniel Birge refused the rich—the re-naming of the little lake.

"Great-great-grandpap found it, and it'll keep his name," was all he said.

And because Dan Birge "had a way with him"—even as his grandson, the present Dan Birge, had a "way with him"—the summer colony never questioned the matter again. Birge's Lake and Birge's Corners were christened for eternity.

Meanwhile, middle class inhabitants came to live at the Corners, houses multiplied from season to season, the Hotel Button came into existence, as did rival blacksmiths' shops and Submit Curler's store. Even a traveling dentist took rooms at Betsey Pilrig's for every Thursday, and the Methodist and Baptist churches ran a race as to the height of their steeples.

Time soon enough changed the ways and the likings of the rich. The old homes came to be rented out or closed for two and three years at a time. Some were put on the market, but no one ever bought them. Well-built mansions they were, with twenty and thirty rooms and

THE GRAY ANGELS

grounds extending back for half an acre, stables with rooms for the coachman's family, private boat landings, romantic rustic arbors where tea used to be served, and summer houses with lacey latticework where débutantes gathered to read Tennyson and their own love letters.

Birge's Corners built up so rapidly that the decline of Birge's Lake was scarcely noticed. One by one the families stopped coming to the lake for the summer. There were newer, more luxurious or more isolated places — their younger generation complained of the lack of thrilling events. The "ghost village" it was truthfully called, house after house lying idle, save for stray sparrows or squirrels who burrowed snugly in the eaves.

"Ali Baba" — Joshua Maples in writing — was made general caretaker. One by one the families left him in charge of the ghost mansions. He knew just which room it was where the Confederate captain married the Boston belle, and how many roses had been used in the decorations. He could tell the exact spot in the Luddington house where young Luddington had shot himself — the night before his theft of bank funds should be made public.

A stranger could not point at any of the deserted mansions but what Ali Baba, taking off his tattered hat and scratching his white, curly head philosophically, would summon a word picture of the past, when the curly head had been black and the wrinkled face smooth and boyish.

"They say society has all gone to live at Newport in the summer," Ali Baba would summarize. "Well, mebbe they has. All I know is this — that right here at Birge's Lake from 1860 to 1890 — for nigh thirty years, there wasn't no place in the land that could boast of entertaining any finer. We've had three presidents come fishing — right there by that landing — and Patti

THE GRAY ANGELS

sang 'The Last Rose of Summer' in that big house over there — the one with the gables. I passed the punch afterwards — yes, sir, right up to time I was, in a new dress suit Major McAndrews bought me. I never heard nobody sing as she did — and the wimmen said her pink satin train was six feet long. Well, I'll take that back — I have heard it sung as good and mebbe better by a girl right in this village — a nightingale girl named Thurley Precore.

"That Swiss cha-lay over there was built in 1878 by Hugo Fiske — he and his bride were going to come here summers — she died the day before the wedding, and he come on here, as soon as she was buried, and stayed all alone, his wedding bags and finery stacked in the hall and never unpacked. He kept trampin', trampin', trampin' through the woods and around the lake, never speakin' to a soul. By and by, when he had walked it all out, he come to the livery and asked to be taken to the train. I happened to be handy then, and so I drove him over. When I helped him out and toted his bags, he says to me, 'Ali Baba, tell Abby Clergy I understand' — and he never come back again."

Here the old man would become uncommunicative, and, when the stranger would idly ask, "Who was Abby Clergy?" — all the answer would be was:

"His neighbor."

Then the stranger might suggest the danger of burglars. To which Ali Baba would answer:

"I guess you don't know these parts — oh, we got a few burglars — robins and chipmunks and that kind."

If the stranger asked "Why are you called Ali Baba?" looking with interest at his rosy old face, Ali Baba would bid him good-by without further ado and make his way homeward, past Birge's Corners to Birge's Lake to a

THE GRAY ANGELS

certain red brick mansion, with every shuttered window fastened tight, save those at the back, and the gleam of lights showing from upper front windows. Ali Baba would find his way to the back of the house, tiptoeing meekly inside an immaculate summer kitchen to find his widowed sister, Hopeful Whittier, to whom he would say:

"Land sakes and Mrs. Davis, I got talkin' again over to Oyster Jim's — a fellow in one of those gosh-darn leather coats — seems to me he never would stop askin' questions!"

Hopeful, stern and forbidding in her slate-colored calico, would answer, "Ali Baba, do you know Miss Abby has been waiting — it is PAST four o'clock?"

Without delay Ali Baba would rush to the barn and in magical order arrange a shining, old-style harness on an iron gray mare, hitch the same to an old-style, closed coupé padded with scarlet silk, shades of past glory! On the coupé door was a monogram — A. C., entwined with plumes and fleur-de-lis. Donning a black frock coat and silk hat, both slightly green when the sun met them unexpectedly, Ali Baba would mount the coach seat, and, with a grave "Come on, Melba," to the mare, would cause her to stalk sedately out of the barn, down the gravel path to the side porch where the carved door would open and a peculiar little person, seemingly very old, would step outside. She would be dressed in a long out-of-date black coat and a round, felt hat fastened under her chin by an elastic. Her shoes would be rough and shabby, and her gray hair betray itself as fastened in an unbecoming "button" under her hat. As she would put one hand on the coupé door, it would show itself to be yellowed and feeble. She never wore gloves, but the most beautiful rings in the world sparkled innocently on the

THE GRAY ANGELS

small fingers, pigeon blood rubies, white water diamonds, a black pearl, emeralds and sapphires, and on her thumb was a great cameo ring held in place by a jewelled guard.

Around this small person's neck would be a thick, old-style braided watch chain, at the end of which dangled glassless, gold lorgnettes which she never used. As she lifted her face to Ali Baba's respectfully inclining ear to say the same phrase she had said for thirty-five years—"An hour's drive, Ali Baba, not too fast,"—one could see that she had dark, restless eyes and a thin, sharp face, a flexible mouth drawn into a melancholy expression and a bulging forehead bespeaking more brains than are usual.

The coupé door would close and down would come the faded scarlet curtains. Ali Baba, laying the whip a full eight inches above Melba's iron-gray back, would then effect a triumphant exit out of the driveway.

So it was that Miss Clergy, sole occupant of the ghost village, drove at four each day of the year, rain or shine, save when the snow piled too high to let the old-fashioned sledge proceed. "An hour's drive, Ali Baba, not too fast" had become a village slogan.

No one ever questioned Ali Baba concerning Miss Clergy, or commented on the appearance of the coupé with its white-haired driver and curtained occupant, until, in the year nineteen hundred and twelve, something else *very* thrilling happened in Birge's Corners, something which made Abigail Clergy's love tragedy seem remote, scarcely worth remembering.

The person concerned in the event had been told the real story of Abigail Clergy, and why Joshua Maples was called "Ali Baba," and why Miss Clergy drove at four, always alone and with the curtains drawn, and why the children were afraid of her and called her witch, trying

THE GRAY ANGELS

to make their mothers admit that the Clergy house was haunted. That person was Thurley Precore — born in Arcadia, the Corners admitted, although they did not call it by that name. They said, "Wherever Thurley Precorne managed to get that smile and face and voice of hers and to sing more and more like an angel when every one knew —" and so forth and so on, the deduction arrived at being that God had let Himself realize His dream of beauty when He created Thurley Precore — Thurley with the most worthless, indifferent parents about whom the Corners had ever heard tell.

Thurley was twenty when the "thrilling event" happened. But her advent into the Corners ten years before is worth recording. To the older generation, in fact, it had been a happening of great interest, and, had it not taken place, the really thrilling event in 1912 could never have occurred. But younger generations never consider the law of cause and effect, so they shrugged their shoulders in impatience when their elders insisted on re-telling to out-of-town visitors how Thurley Precore first "sang for her supper."

CHAPTER II

There had driven into the stableyard of the Hotel Button a queer box-car wagon on rickety yellow wheels, unwillingly pulled by tired nags. The wagon had a hope-to-die roof and a smokestack. On the driver's seat was a ragged man and an impetuous young person in faded blue gingham. The impetuous young person was driving and singing "God Be With Us Till We Meet Again"—unconscious of the beauty of her voice.

Her father nodded approval, as the song ended and the wagon halted before the stable door. As the story goes, young Dan Birge and Lorraine McDowell, the minister's only child, were playing hop-scotch in imminent danger of the horses' feet. They paused to stare at the newcomers. The young person had begun in business-like fashion:

"I want to speak to the pro-pry-e-tor. My name is Thurley, Thurley Precore, and this is my dad. He's awful sick. We come all the way from Boulder, out in Colorado—I guess you don't know where that is, but it's miles'n' miles from here. My ma is sick, too,—she's lyin' down inside, and she'll have to see a doctor right off. Where is the pro-pry-e-tor? Ain't you listening to me? We sell tinware—why, say, our pots and pans can't be beat—nor matched. Even the gypsies said so when we camped with 'em at Lisbon, Ohio. Isn't it so, pa?" turning her flushed, lovely face to the man beside her.

"I guess if you says it is—it is," he chuckled. "Ladies and gentlemen," he added to the astonishment

THE GRAY ANGELS

of the boy and girl, "what Thurley says goes — she's been runnin' this family for enough years to prove that she kin," the chuckle ended in a hollow cough.

Then, the wretched lace-curtained window was pushed open, and a woman's faded face appeared, a vapid, senseless face with dyed blond hair and china-doll blue eyes; a wisp of pink ribbon showed about her drawn throat.

"Dear me, Cornelius, don't stand here all day," she began fretfully. "Thurley, come right inside and git on some decent duds. I guess folks think, because we're travellin' in a wagon, that we ain't no better than gypsies — well, every one has their high days AND their low ones. If my father could see me now!" Her thin hands loaded with cheap rings lifted into view and twelve-year-old Daniel Birge, counted as the gallows' brightest prospect, nudged Lorraine McDowell, the only girl he ever played with — because his father made him — until they both laughed.

"Of all the bringin' up!" floated out in thin, melancholy tones. "Cornelius, are you goin' to set there like a bump on a log and have me laffed at?"

But Thurley had jumped down and with clenched fists approached Daniel and Lorraine. She paused, woman-like, to give vent to her opinion before she should strike. Just then Prince Hawkins and his wife and Betsey Pilrig and her lame grandchild, Philena, gathered as spectators.

They said afterwards that all the devils in the world seemed flashing from the strange child's blue eyes. She was barefoot and ragged; her dress far too short for her long-legged, awkward self, and her mop of brown hair in a disorderly braid. But she had a fine, strong body, despite the ragged dress, and, although she possessed not a single regular feature, there was a prophecy of true greatness in her face.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Daniel and Lorraine stared at the brown, clenched fists. They were the ordinary, well-dressed, well-nourished children to be seen in such a backwoods town as Birge's Corners.

"Now you laff again," Thurley commanded. "Laff — go on — let me hear you. I want to tell you I got a sick pa and ma, and we certainly have played hard luck all the way from Boulder, Colorado. I guess, if you had any manners, you'd not laff at us. Not if we do peddle tinware and tell fortunes by tea leaves. We ain't always done it, and we ain't always goin' to. But we're in hard luck — don't you understand? And don't you dare to laff when my ma talks or call us gypsies. We're white folks, but we're just a little bit discouraged," her angry voice betrayed a quiver.

The others had gathered nearer to hear what was being said, looking up at the driver's seat to where the wreck of a man sat smoking his corn-cob pipe, secure in the defense established by his small virago.

"I tell you right now," Thurley's mother supplemented, "that, when I had my health and was on the stage, I could have bought and sold the whole town. My father was a real Kentucky colonel, and I was brought up to never lift a finger —"

At which Thurley's father took his pipe from his mouth long enough to say, "Shut up, Jen; let the kid give it to 'em — she knows how."

Thurley took up the burden of defense. "We want the pro-pry-e-tor. We want to camp here to-night, and get some vittles and we'll give him the loveliest new tins — as bright as silver. Where is the pro-pry-e-tor?"

Prince Hawkins and his wife, taking pity on the child, came to her rescue.

"Oh, pshaw, I don't believe we want none of them

THE GRAY ANGELS

tins!" Mrs. Hawkins said. "We got more now than we ever use."

Tears gathered in Thurley's eyes. She turned her head so they would remain a secret.

"Maybe you'd like your fortunes told?" suggested Mrs. Precore from the window ledge. "Honest, I certainly have told some remarkable things — why, a Chicago finan-seer wanted me to settle in Chicago so he could get my advice as to the stock exchange —" Here she gave way to coughing and vanished completely.

"My ma and pa is too sick to work," Thurley added, determined to gain her point. "I got to get a doctor for them to-morrow. We was headin' for a city, but we sort of run out of supplies —" She bit her underlip.

"Maybe you'd like a stewpan?" she coaxed of Betsey Pilrig.

"Take it, granny," Philena whispered.

"Lemme see it," Betsey answered.

Thurley tore inside the wagon to re-appear with a motley collection of flimsy tins, bent and battered from their long journey.

A titter ran around the crowd. With the courage born of despair Thurley threw back her head and cried out, "Well, then, if nobody wants to buy anything — I kin sing for our supper!"

"All right, you poor lamb," Mrs. Prince Hawkins answered, "sing for us, and we'll see that you get a good hot supper."

Thurley's father took his pipe out of his mouth again to say, "She kin sing, ma'am."

So Thurley, mounting a step of the wagon, began "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms," the sun shining on her dark head, lighting up unexpected glints of Titian red. A passing teamster paused to listen,

THE GRAY ANGELS

and applauded when she had finished, and the circle of critics were awed and quiet. For the ragged child seemed to vanish; she was merely the instrument for the glorious voice unhampered by artificial notions. Thurley sang as she had always done, winning for the inefficient parents — "life's sinking ships," some one had called them — their food and keep.

"Sing us another, and you can stay another day," Prince Hawkins called out as the applause ceased.

Thurley responded graciously with:

There was an old man and he had a wooden leg,
He had no tobacco, nor tobacco could he beg.
Another old man had a wooden box,
And he always kept tobacco in the old tobacco box.
Said the first old man, "Gimme a chew."
Said the second old man, "Durned if I do.
Take my advice and save up your rocks
And you'll always have tobacco in the old tobacco box!"

"I know dozens," she announced happily, as she hopped down on to the ground, "but, if you don't mind, I'd rather have supper now and sing some more to-morrow."

"Drive into that shed," Prince Hawkins told her. "You come around to the kitchen — I guess your pa can unhitch, can't he?"

Thurley laughed. "Dear, no — makes him cough — he's got a pain in his side, too. I sang four songs in the last town for painkiller, but it didn't do him any good — over there, pa, dear — I'll be with you in a minnit." She watched the rickety wagon creak towards the shed.

Betsey Pilrig and Philena crowded about Thurley. "Is your mother awful sick, too?" Betsey asked.

Thurley nodded. "Always been sick — guess she al-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ways will be. Pa has been sick, too — ever since I remember anything."

"Where are their folks?" Mrs. Hawkins demanded. "Somebody ought to look after them!"

"Guess they haven't any," Thurley answered easily. "Guess they're all dead — or something."

She looked reproachfully at Daniel and Lorraine, who had retreated several feet away. "Guess you won't laff again," she said imperiously.

She passed them with an absurd swagger, and a moment later they saw her unhitching the tired nags with the dexterity of a groom.

"I swan," Mrs. Hawkins said to Betsey Pilrig, "that mite carin' for those worthless beggars — gettin' her to sell their old pans — did you ever see such blue eyes and did you ever, ever hear any one sing like that? She'll be famous, if she don't starve to death takin' care of them first!"

"Granny," said Philena Pilrig, — being lame Philena never played with other children — "I love that little girl; ask her to come see me."

"She don't have time for visiting, I guess," her grandmother answered. "We'll send her something nice to eat; she'd rather have that."

Behind the woodpile Daniel and Lorraine were talking it over.

"I'm sorry I laughed," Lorraine said penitently. "You made me — my father don't let me laugh at poor folks."

"Because he's a minister — I laughed because it was funny," Dan retorted, his dark eyes flashing, "and I bet now that — what's her name? — Thurley would have laughed too, if she could have looked in a glass and seen herself. I like her. I bet *she* wouldn't cry, if she got

THE GRAY ANGELS

lost in the woods." This with a reproachful expression.

Lorraine moved nearer him. "Dan, I didn't really cry; I was just nervous. Maybe I can do things this girl can't; anyhow, I don't go around in a ragged dress and my hair all ruffled," and she smoothed the pattern of her pink frock proudly. She was fair-haired with dove-colored eyes and tiny, dainty features.

Dan did not answer. Lorraine touched his arm. "Are you mad?" she whispered earnestly.

"Not mad, but you know, Lorraine, I only play with you because my father makes me — because your father's the minister and pa thinks it looks well." Daniel possessed the aggressive frankness of the Birge family, but he had not acquired their customary diplomacy.

Lorraine's underlip quivered. "Wouldn't you play with me, unless I was?" she asked wistfully. "I always liked you best of every one."

Daniel stared at her in contempt. "I like you — but you're a girl, and I like the gang better — I bet though that now — what was it? — Thurley — I bet Thurley would be one of the gang, as if she were a fellow."

"So you like that ragged girl?" Lorraine asked in alarm.

Dan nodded. "When she sang, my heart beat loud, and she looked at me more'n she did the rest. I'm going to tell her I'm sorry I laughed."

Lorraine turned to leave him. "My father won't want me playing with you, Dan, even if your great-great-great-grandfather did discover the lake and your father has money. Everybody knows your father has a gambling room and sells beer on Sunday — now! And if you play with a tin peddler's girl, my father won't let me play with you — tra-la-la —" She began singing shrilly.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"If I was you, I wouldn't try to sing after what we've just heard," Dan flung back defiantly, "and, when your father wants a new roof on his old church or another carpet, he'll be glad enough to take my father's saloon money."

With which they parted, Lorraine repairing to the parsonage with her budget of woes, and Dan striding across to the box-car wagon, to knock at the door.

Thurley's mother appeared. "What is it, boy?" she demanded fretfully. "Dear me, I was napping and you woke me up with such a start my head aches. Thurley, here's that boy that luffed."

Dan took the opportunity to peer inside the wagon. To his mind such an existence would be unquestionably jolly, traveling, traveling, traveling, with no school, no rules or regulations whatsoever. He had a good mind to bind himself out to the Precore family then and there, despite the fact of being Daniel Birge's only child and the wealthiest boy in the place, as his father often told him.

Inside the wagon was a rude partition. Thurley was busied with something in the front. The stock in trade of tins lined the walls, jangling discordantly on the slightest provocation. Faded stage photographs in plush frames punctuated the row of cakepans from the stewing kettles, and between the stewing kettles and the frying pans were some of Thurley's contraptions — hand-colored "ladies," which she had cut from fashion books or magazines and pasted on the wall. There was a rickety lounge with a red velvet "throw," and an attempt at an easy chair, a tiny oil stove and a wretched cupboard which resembled Mother Hubbard's concerning contents. Scraps of carpet were on the floor, a packing trunk held the Precore wardrobe. An alarm clock minus one hand, but ticking

THE GRAY ANGELS

bravely, a copy of "Dreams and Premonitions," a palm leaf fan, an old accordion, some greasy playing cards, whiskey bottles, kerosene lamps, a green penholder without any point and a few yellow-backed novels were the ornaments. The other side of the partition was evidently sleeping quarters.

Thurley appeared to demand indignantly, "Well — going to laff again?"

"Come outside," Dan ordered, looking darkly at Thurley's mother.

Thurley followed, her mother flopping down on the lounge and calling to Cornelius to bring her some tea.

Outside the wagon Daniel halted, coming up close to Thurley and adopting a confidential tone of voice.

"I'm Daniel Birge," he said. "My great-great-great-grandfather discovered this lake, and I guess you'll hear all about our family if you stay here long enough. My father owns that brick building down there. It's a saloon and a blacksmith shop and a real estate office all in one. Ain't that awful?" This with a boy grimace. "When I'm a man, it's going to be a big department store. All the good folks in this town expect to see me go to hell." Being the only boy officially allowed to swear, Dan waited for her to be shocked.

But Thurley settled herself on the steps of the wagon, hugging her long legs up under her. "I suppose there'll be some nice people in hell," she commented by way of comfort.

Daniel drew out a sheet of paper. "I'm going to have Ali Baba print this in big letters on a card and stick it up over the barn, but maybe it would show better if I put it on your wagon — 'cause everybody will come to see that, and so they'd see my card."

Thurley read the offered paper:

THE GRAY ANGELS

Big Show to-morrow in D. Birge's barn
D. Birge manager
Peple our age — ten pins. Children — five pins
See the great swinging man
and
Mising link.
Come early — but one performance so why mis it?

"Are you twelve years old?" was all Thurley commented, handing it back.

Dan nodded. "Can't I put it on your wagon, Thurley?" He spoke her name softly, as if uncertain of his right.

"You haven't spelled people nor missing as it is in books," she corrected, a small finger pointing out his errors.

"What difference does that make? Folks know what you mean. As long as you make folks know what you mean, you don't have to waste time learning how to spell and that truck — my father don't make me go to school, no siree, not if I don't want to go; he never went much nor his father nor his father nor his father!" he asserted. "We just about own the Corners, too. There ain't anybody for miles around that dares sass my father. We started the rich folks coming to this lake, and we got a lot of their trade, and my father can buy any man in this town and then tell him where to get off — even the minister — so there! What's the good of spelling words right?"

For the first time in his life, however, Dan seemed anxious to meet with approval. When he told the gang his opinions, they listened respectfully, for did not Dan Birge have hip-boots and a bicycle with a coaster brake, to say nothing of unlimited spending money and permission — cruel, unjust world! — to skip school and go swim-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ming whenever he liked! True, there were things Dan Birge did not have — he had no mother, no one to take care of him when he was sick, no home — but boys did not analyze these things. They only knew that Dan Birge and his father lived at the Hotel Button like real travelling-men, and young Dan wore better clothes and swore more profusely and had his own way more than any one else in the Corners. His father, rough, shaggy-haired, black-eyed pirate that he was, feared by all, treated this only child as something to be revered and indulged to the point of absurdity. He was the only human being Dan Birge had ever loved, for he had not loved the frail little woman who had taken his name — and his tempers — borne his son and died with a faint sigh of relief.

Some claimed there was Indian blood in Dan Birge. The ancestor discovering the lake had been a trapper and hunter, and many said this ancestor's wife was no less than a Mohawk squaw. Certain it was that Dan's graceful self, with dark eyes and olive skin and the mop of blue-black hair which would not "stay put," could have been called proof of the rumor, also his loyal, generous actions towards the few he liked, and the cold-blooded revenge he executed towards an enemy. As for the Birge temper, surely it suggested tomahawks, scalping and being burnt at the stake, with its relentless whirlwind of expression once roused. Dan Birge's father had the sense to know he was a madman when he was in a rage and he would lock himself in a room, because he was not responsible for his actions, and wait until the spasm had been expended.

His son Dan, having had little to rouse his temper, had not yet been forced to such a procedure. Something in the boy's dignified manner, a deviation from his father's

THE GRAY ANGELS

blustering self, would indicate that young Dan's temper could remain at white heat, influencing his actions almost to madness long after his father's more dramatic rage had died away and humiliating remorse set in.

There was, as well, a superstition about the fate of a woman who would marry a Birge, for all the Birges' wives, excepting the rumored squaw, had been adoring, meek individuals who lived until they bore a son and then died, leaving some one else to bring him up!

Dan had been raised by Submit Curler, Oyster Jim, Ali Baba, Betsey Pilrig, Hopeful Whittier — and himself. He began domineering over his father, as a new tyrant always wins easily over an old one, before he was a year old. At three the Corners looked aghast at his antics, and shivered at his vocabulary.

"Well," Thurley Precore answered with spirit equal to Dan's, "you think you're smart, because your pa has money, but there's lots of people smarter than your pa, and I think, if a man has to choose between knowing how to spell and everything and having a little money, he better choose learning. Because he'll be smart enough to think up a way to take money from the man that don't know anything. Wait and see. You better go to school while you got the chance and learn — you'll need it some day. My goodness, I wisht we'd ever stop in one place long enough to let me go to school. I have to just grab for all I know. The longest we stay anywheres is winters — out in Iowa — and an old hoss thief, Aggie Tim, traveled with us for awhile and he taught me my tables and lightnin' calculating. I bet you don't know any — I bet I know more'n you do —"

"I bet you don't," Dan retorted.

"Name the presidents of the United States," pointing an accusing finger at him.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"McKinley — but he's shot and we got Roosevelt," Daniel bragged.

"I mean from the start of this country — Washington —"

"Oh, sure, everybody knows about him, he never told a lie — like fun he didn't — we don't have school on his birthday. But I never have to go to school, if I don't want to. I can stay in bed until nine o'clock and have pork sausage and griddle cakes and coffee sent up to my room. I can make Mrs. Hawkins send 'em up, even if she puts it on the bill — my father lets me and he gives me a dollar at a time and lets me spend it as I like. Sometimes he gives me beer to drink, and he takes me to cities on convention trips — he belongs to lodges and he gets himself made delegate — you ought to see the hotels we stay at with music playing for all the meals. I get a new suit and a whole lot of stuff to play with and so much candy that I have to stay in bed and just holler with the stomach-ache — there!" He paused with a characteristic Birge tilt of the head.

Thurley's eyes were serious as she answered, "I'm sorry for you. When you're a man and have a little boy, I hope you'll bring him up better than you have been brought up. You'll go to jail, if you keep on acting so wicked."

"Jail? Why, my pa knows the sheriff an' everybody. I guess he knows the president."

"If he knows so many people and is so smart, why don't he live some place besides this funny town?" Thurley demanded.

This stumped Dan for a moment, then he answered, "His property is here and he can do what he's a mind to. If he moved to a city, he'd have to get acquainted with all the police and everything — see?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I don't like that. I guess you better not introduce me to your father; I wouldn't approve of him. I won't live in a little town. I want to be famous and have every one know me, when I drive through the streets, and have people throw flowers at me, when I sing. I want to do something wonderful — and good!" she ended emphatically.

"What could you do?" sneered Dan.

Stung by the inference, she took hold of his shoulders and gave him a sound shaking. "I told you — sing — sing — sing, you silly boy that can't spell and eats too much candy. I can sing, and nobody can take that away from me or make me stop."

She released him unexpectedly, and he fell backwards over the step. He picked himself up in amazement, collecting his thoughts and saying slowly, "If you were a boy, I'd lick you."

"Dare you — go on — pretend I am a boy." She thrust her bare foot across the imaginary, forbidden line drawn by opponents.

Dan laughed. "Honest, I like you too much. You ain't a coward like Lorraine McDowell; she cries if a little bit of a toad hops her way. She likes me more'n I like her and I hate that."

"Was that Lorraine with the pretty dress?" Thurley's red lips twitched impatiently.

"Oh, she's got lots of dresses — she's always having parties and speaking in school, but she's a cry-baby. Just because she's the minister's daughter she thinks she's got to be in everything. . . . Thurley, what words was spelled wrong in that circus poster?" Dan's dark eyes looked humbly at the new tyrant. "I'm taller'n you," he could not refrain from adding.

"People — p-e-o-p-l-e — and two ss's in missing."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I'll change 'em, if you'll come."

"If I can find the pins."

"No, you come and sing, and I'll write on here, 'Hear the wonderful singer from way out west; she has travelled miles to get here.' It'll be the next best thing to the swinging man."

"All right." Thurley clapped her hands. "Who is the swinging man?"

"Why, me," he answered, in innocent surprise at her question.

"Is Lorraine going to be in it?"

"Not much! She's got to get pins and come and watch us."

"Then I'll sing, because I don't think I like ministers' children."

This was another bond between them. But Dan's way of showing it was to ask, "Where do you go to winters?"

"Mostly the winter quarters of O'Brien's circus. Ma used to pose in living pictures with one of the O'Brien girls and that's why we got invited. The quarters are out in Iowa, and it's just like having a real house and home. Sometimes acrobats that got hurt during the season rest up, or clowns, and one winter we had the india-rubber man and his wife, the bearded woman; and he taught me a lot of songs and she showed me two fancy steps in dancing. Of course, the nicest part is having the animals."

"Animals?" demanded Dan incredulously. "You mean — circus animals?"

"Sure, that's what the quarters are for — tigers and bears and monkeys and an elephant or two and a lion, and, for the last two winters, I was big enough to help rub in the tonic."

THE GRAY ANGELS

Dan's eyes were aflame with curiosity. "Tonic?" he whispered. "What are you trying to hand me?" New worlds were rapidly opening for the young czar.

"Skin tonic — to get their coats in shape for the opening on Decoration Day. Sometimes they're as glossy as silk by spring. Pa and Ma used to do it when I was too little, but their coughs got awful bad, so I took the job."

"You mean — you swear to goodness," Dan's voice sunk to an excited whisper, "you rubbed tonic on — on a tiger?"

Thurley nodded carelessly; she saw no cause for agitation. "Yes, they need a lot — almost as much as the giraffe — his neck's so long. After we used pails of it on the giraffe, he died — wasn't that tough beans? The men holds 'em and we keep pouring it on and rubbing it on — they get real used to it after awhile — most of 'em haven't any teeth anyhow. I wouldn't be scared of any circus animal, if I had a pail of our tonic with me — they all know it for an old friend. It comes in a big, red pail labelled 'Ma Thorpe's Sheep Dip — Cures Man and Beast Alike.' Why, one clown was the baldest thing you ever saw and he nearly beat the Sutherland Sisters at their own game when spring came, and the bearded lady never sat down for a moment that she wasn't dipping her hand in a little saucer of it and rubbing it on her chin."

"I declare," sighed Dan, fairly writhing with envy. "What else do you do?"

"Paint the props over, and the clown practises his shines, and Ma and the bearded lady went over all the property tights and costumes and darned and washed 'em and sewed on new spangles. It was like a real family. You know," she edged up confidentially, "I always played that it *was* a family — with the india-rubber man and his wife for the father and mother, and the clowns and acro-

THE GRAY ANGELS

bats for uncles and aunts, and all the animals — except the snakes — were my brothers and sisters. I played the snakes were out-of-town relations."

"And what were your own father and mother?" Dan managed to inquire.

"Merely neighbors," Thurley said with chilly politeness.

Presently Dan sighed, "I wisht you'd stay in this town. Don't your father or mother ever work or anything?"

"They're sick. I guess I ought to have been their father and mother. All the way here I sung for food and sold tins. Ma didn't tell but two fortunes all the time. She got a summer squash for one and some lake trout for the other."

"Then you're dead poor," the boy was thinking out loud.

"Yes, but when I'm big and can sing in a hall and get a dollar a night — then we won't be poor. We can travel in steam cars and Pa can have all the painkiller he likes, and Ma can just lay on a sofa and read novels and cry."

Dan put his hand in his pocket and drew out some money. "Thurley, I want to honest buy some pans — can I — how much?"

"You're giving me money for something you don't want!"

"By George, listen to her!" he informed the tired horses nibbling at posts. "I do, too — I want to put 'em away for Mrs. Hawkins' Christmas present."

"She said she didn't need any. Didn't you hear?"

"But presents ain't what you need, but what you get."

"I couldn't — you're just being nice."

"Well, I tell you — I'm manager of the show and I can pay you to sing, can't I?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley's eyes brightened. Dreams do come true, if one is patient.

"Yes, I'd take money for singing," she admitted.

"How much?"

"A cent a song to begin with — if I take well, you can make it two."

Dan emptied the money into her ragged lap. "It's about a dollar — and you can sing a hundred songs."

"At one performance?"

"No, we're going to South Wales and Pike and give our show."

"Thurley, come in quick, your ma's took bad," called a weak voice from within. "I guess she'll have to be rubbed."

"I'll have to go — thanks, Dan."

"Good-by, Thurley; I hope she's not awful sick — to-morrow —"

"To-morrow," she waved one hand, the other holding the tattered dress skirt with its burden of coins.

Half an hour later Mrs. Hawkins, coming to the box wagon to find out why the travellers had not appeared for their supper, found Thurley and her father kneeling beside the lounge.

"She must have died just as I come in," Mrs. Hawkins told the neighbors. "Poor little lamb, blessed if she didn't start right in to comfort that miserable dad of hers! Well, I guess them hosses will stay unhitched for some time to come!"

CHAPTER III

The sale of the nags brought enough to pay for the burial of Mrs. Precore. After which Betsey Pilrig sent word to have some one wheel the wagon up to the empty pasture land, across from her house, where it could stay as long as was necessary, at least until they had enough money to buy more horses and go somewhere else.

So the dingy white wagon was anchored across from Betsey Pilrig's, to Philena's delight, and, while Thurley's father stayed inside to sob in half-drunken fashion about "his loss," Thurley made rapid inroads on Betsey's and Philena's hearts.

For that matter, she had made inroads upon the hearts of Birge's Corners *en masse*. Even Lorraine loaned her a black hat for the funeral and stripped her garden of late blossoms to lay in the wasted fingers.

Thurley had sung at her mother's funeral. "They always have music," she told them, and, besides, "it made her feel better inside." So, standing at the newly dug grave, the curious mourners watched this long-legged, blue-eyed child-woman in every one's discarded black clothes sing bravely:

Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me,
Bless thy little lambs to-night,
In the darkness hear me calling,
Lead me to eternal light —

"It's a wonder she knows any hymn tunes," Submit Curler had whispered to Ali Baba.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Says she learned 'em from a gypsy evangelist," Ali Baba answered, happy to be able to inform Submit Curler, rather than be informed.

"She hasn't a shoe for the winter," Betsey Pilrig was telling Hopeful. "Don't it seem sinful to think of Abby Clergy with her thousands?"

Hopeful nodded. "But I wouldn't dare to mention it. I've got some things of my own, Betsey. Come around after dark. Ain't it a disgrace to have that man come drunk to his wife's funeral? If God is just, Betsey, tell me why He gave that beautiful young'un with an angel's voice those parents?"

But the minister began to pray, so Betsey was spared answering.

After the funeral, Thurley and her father had retired within the box-car wagon to "grieve proper," Ali Baba summarized, and every one left them alone, except Dan Birge, junior, who promptly knocked at the wreck of a door.

Ali Baba tried to stop him, although it was nearing four o'clock, sacred hour for Miss Clergy's drive.

"Hi, you — ain't you no reverence?" he demanded. "There's been death in that — that household."

"I got business with her," Dan retorted, knocking more boldly.

"You don't own this town any more'n I do. You come down off that step, you upstart."

"Chase yourself — I got to speak to Thurley." Dan made a tantalizing face. "You don't dare touch me — you ghost coachman — aha — aha —" Thurley opened the door just in time to allow Dan to make good his escape.

Within, he stood back, abashed and silent.

"What is it, Dan?" she asked mournfully. "If it's

THE GRAY ANGELS

the money you gave me — it's gone. I'm sorry, but Pa needed 'comfort' for the burial."

"Oh, that's nothing — he got the 'comfort' at my pa's store, so it's back in the till. I wanted to say I was sorry and we won't have the circus until you're feeling fit."

Thurley's eyes filled with tears. "Your mother's dead, too, ain't she?" she asked.

"My mother died when I was born," he confided. "I guess I'd rather have it that way. It would hurt worse to lose your mother, after you really knew her. Say, Thurley, I wanted to tell you I'd like to have you join our gang. There's about eight of us now — all boys — but I think you'd be just as good. Maybe it would make you forget; maybe your father will go to work and you'll never go away from here; maybe my father will give him a job, if he can tote barrels. I'll ask him and you join our gang and we'll be happy."

"I'll have to work," Thurley corrected. "Pa's awful sick; Ma thought he would die when we was on the road. He can't tote barrels and neither can I, but I'd like to join the gang, Dan, if I have time. And when your circus plays at South Wales, I'll come and sing." She held out her hand in gratitude.

The boy took it awkwardly. "I liked you right off," he admitted. "If you see me getting too fresh or misspelling words or things like that — tell me. I'll take it from you. Everybody thinks because my father made money selling beer that I'm going to be hung. Maybe I'll go to school like you said — I'm not going to be any old bum, anyhow — and, if you decide to join the gang, we meet at Wood's Hollow by Dog Creek every afternoon it ain't raining, but don't tell Lorraine McDowell,

THE GRAY ANGELS

because she wanted to be my girl this winter and I won't let her."

With which he strutted out of the wagon with the serious feeling of a muchly married man. Somehow Dan had "adopted" Thurley. He felt personally responsible for her happiness and support, and, when he tried convincing his father that Thurley ought to get nine dollars a week for doing nothing and his father jokingly dismissed the matter, Daniel registered a vow that he must see to it that she had everything for which her feminine soul should desire! It was the first time in his life that the finer part of the lad had had a chance to show itself.

Philena Pilrig told her grandmother after Thurley's first visit, "She makes my fingers tingle down at the ends, and, when she smiles, I want to hug her, and, when she sings, I want to cry and dance all at once."

Philena, who was eleven but small because of the twisted spine, sat in the window facing the old wagon car, so she could catch glimpses of Thurley striding about bare-legged, her ragged dress fluttering gracefully in the breeze, whistling or singing or calling out to her father who lay on the lounge and coughed and complained.

Having invited the Precoces to camp on her land, Betsey Pilrig also felt responsible for their welfare. She saw to it that Thurley washed dishes and ran errands in return for food, and, once, when she ventured over to interview her father as to his intentions of ever working, Thurley stood guard on the steps to tell her "Pa was sleeping — he's getting that gray look around his lips."

"Thurley, did you ever go to Sunday school?" she asked one afternoon when Thurley and Philena were intent on paper dolls.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"No, but it's where you learn about the Lord and you have a Christmas tree — the evangelist told me."

"Philena gets there except in bad weather — maybe you and she could go together," Betsey suggested.

"I've the loveliest teacher!" Philena supplemented. "Her name is Kate Sills, and she's going to marry the postmaster — she has a beautiful white plume on her hat."

"I'd like to go, if I had shoes. I guess you can't get in barefoot."

"Maybe we can find shoes, if that's all that's wrong."

"I can be a home missionary, granny," Philena's little old face lighted with smiles. "You know — the money in my bank."

Thurley flushed. "I don't want any one's money — least of all Philena's. What is a home missionary?"

"I'm going to be a foreign missionary when I'm big and strong," Philena answered. "It's some one who sails off to China or Africa where they find heathens ready to eat them up; the heathens throw their babies into the river and don't believe in God, and the missionaries teach them to build nice houses and dress their babies in white and sing songs. I heard a real true one tell about it last winter — she stayed two days at Lorraine's house — and that's what I'm going to be, isn't it, granny?"

"If you're well enough."

"Why couldn't I go with you to Africa or China and sing the songs, and you could pray and teach and I'd mind the babies while you stitched up the white dresses?" Thurley rattled on. "Let's be missionaries together — listen, I'll sing some songs."

"Granny, fetch all the dolls — they can be heathen — that's the ship we're going on — and there is Africa all

THE GRAY ANGELS

full of savages — get my Bible, Thurley, and my bag — we'll pretend we're there now." Philena's crutch tapped quickly over the floor.

Betsey Pilrig, supposed to be busy with her mending, paused to listen to Philena pray for the heathen, her crutch laid aside, kneeling on the floor of "awful Africa," alias the south room alcove. The heathen, six subdued, disinterested dolls and a fast unravelling Teddy-bear, stood in a row listening to her sweet, thin voice conclude:

"Oh, Lord, you have sent us here to save these people, and, if they don't understand what I mean and how wrong it is to sacrifice their young and eat us up — Thurley, isn't it awful to have to say that to the Lord? — but it's so — may their hearts be inspired by the sweet, *sweet* voiced singer who has come with me into the wilderness, forsaking wealth and love to serve the cause. Amen. Now, ladies of Africa," finished Philena, opening her eyes, "Miss Precore will sing." She picked up her crutch and gave way to Thurley.

Whereat Thurley, balancing Philena's pink parasol with one hand and a pretended hymnal in the other, sang "Throw Out the Life Line" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers," until Betsey Pilrig, unable to remain incognito any longer, came to the doorway to say,

"Thurley, Thurley, how did you ever learn to sing?"

Annoyed that the game be interrupted Thurley answered shortly, "God taught me, I guess, but He made my long legs, too. And now, Mrs. Pilrig, unless we finish, we may be taken prisoner any minute and roasted to ashes — look out, Philena, that big one is after you," brandishing her parasol to ward him off.

Properly rebuked Mrs. Pilrig stole away to prepare the missionaries' supper, while Thurley and Philena drew up a compact, signing and dating it to read as follows:

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Thurley Precore and Philena Pilrig of Birge's Corners do swear they will go as missionaries to convert the heathen from eating flesh and all the other bad things they do. Thurley will sing the songs and mind the babies so the mothers can attend the meetings and Philena is to preach and pray and make white dresses for every one. If Lorraine McDowell wants to she can travel in America and raise funds for the cause but nobody shall ever be the same *dear* friends as Thurley Precore and Philena Pilrig. Amen.

"THURLEY PRECORE and PHILENA PILRIG."

They put it between the pages of the illustrated Bible and then, descending to things of the earth earthy, fell upon a batch of newly-baked cookies with the ferocity of the unconverted savages.

In the midst of her cookie Philena paused to remark, "Thurley, do you think my being lame will make any difference — you're so straight and strong —"

Thurley finished her cookie, while she thought up her defense. Spying tears in Philena's eyes she went over to fling her arms about the crooked back and declare, "Philena Pilrig, you'll be armed with your crutch — like a soldier with a gun. You'll really be better to go as a missionary than folks that haven't crutches," clapping her hands in delight at the rainbow smile.

"But nobody ever thinks much of cripples — Oyster Jim fought in the Civil War, and, when he came back lame, nobody married him and he started in having a store — they say he wanted to be a lawyer."

"Then he should have been a lawyer just the same. Wait, Philena, I guess God wants to say something — ssh!" Her eyes were like stars, and she warded off Philena's outstretched arm as if afraid mortal touch

THE GRAY ANGELS

might dim the celestial message. "Oh, lots of times," she added a moment later, "God does tell me things — queer things. Sometimes they rhyme like poems in books and sometimes they're cross — 'cause some one has to scold little girls and Pa and Ma never said anything to me — so God had to scold me, and now He's telling me something to comfort you, Philena. What do you think it is?"

"Oh, you scare me most — talking like a book — God never tells folks things, except what He wrote down in the Bible — whisper it, Thurley —"

"He says, 'Tell Philena that cripples can be conquerors,' " sang Thurley in a clear monotone, "cripples can be conquerors — there — I guess you'll be as good a missionary as ever lived."

Philena repeated it in an awed tone. "That's beautiful — now I don't care about my crutch . . . but how can you tell for sure it's God talking?"

Thurley's eyes were like sapphires in the sun. "Something taps at my heart and I know I'm going to have a wonderful something told me — or a terrible scolding — and then whatever it is God wants to say is just *sung* into my head and I know — I do know, Philena, I am right."

"I wouldn't tell any one, if I was you," Philena suggested enviously.

"No, there's as much about children that grownups don't understand, as there is about grownups we don't understand," Thurley said sagely. "But you can always remember that God said that straight to me — 'cripples can be conquerors' — just like He told me at Midland City, Illinois, 'You let me catch you cutting off your hair and trying to run away and I'll stop your singing mighty quick!' See, Philena?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Isn't it funny?" Thurley told her father that night, "I'm to belong to the gang and play robbers and Indians, and I'm to be a missionary with Philena, and there must be different halves of me, and Dan has seen one half and thinks it is a whole, and so has Philena. I wonder what I'd do if the gang met the same day I'd promised to play missionary?"

A cough answered her. "Is there any more rum?" he fretted.

Regretfully Thurley produced the bottle. "Don't drink until you see things," she begged. "Makes me shiver when you talk down low — there — that's enough for now. . . . I guess if the gang met on missionary day, I'd make 'em all sit down in front of me and I'd sing to 'em — something awful different from gang stuff or missionary hymns, and then neither could be cross."

"I guess," her father hiccupped, "you'll — hic — always be a good fellow."

CHAPTER IV

It was not until Thurley allied herself with the gang at Wood's Hollow that she came into possession of the Corners' great mystery — Abigail Clergy who lived in solitary grandeur in the red brick mansion overlooking the lake.

After Thurley had proved herself as great a success as a good fellow to the gang as she had at convincing Philena of her possibilities as a missionary, and had played hi-spy half the afternoon, she wandered by chance towards the first of the deserted summer houses in lieu of a new hiding place and became fascinated by these silent buildings. She began exploring one after the other, forgetful of the faint "Hul-l-o-o — Thur-lee" which the gang sent in her direction.

Boarded-up windows did not yield to her strong fingers nor tottering verandas offer a cordial invitation to rest. There was a chill in the October air, and Thurley gladly scampered up and down one pair of steps after another, peering into one dark room and then another, wandering through weed-choked gardens and pausing under apple trees to make up stories to suit each house. In her imaginative way she peopled the places with golden-haired ladies and blue-eyed babies, handsome gentlemen driving smart horses, and then every one sitting down to eat tons of good things served by colored waiters. In her motley travels through the country Thurley had obtained glimpses of such elegance, if not actually experiencing it.

The gang was forgotten, so was Philena, and the fact

THE GRAY ANGELS

that she had promised to play missionary at five o'clock. She forgot, as well, that her father was out of "comfort," and would complain all night unless he was supplied, and that she had been worrying all morning as to what they should do when snow carpeted the meadow and the box-car wagon proved inefficient against wind and frost!

Thurley was living in an enchanted land all her own — these houses were hers! One by one she made the imaginary tenants leave and go elsewhere, while she became an imprisoned princess doomed to spend a year in each house before she could be free of the ten-headed dragon! She ran along the shore in delight as she contemplated her prisons. Each day she would come and camp on the outside of the house in which she was imprisoned, playing princess in spangled crimson and lace and pretending the ten-headed dragon lived in a cave in the bottom of the lake and could poke one of his heads up at unexpected moments to see if his prisoner was behaving as he desired!

Then she spied a light burning in the last of the houses. She wondered if she had imagined "until it was better than real," a favorite experience. But as she came closer, she saw several lights and unmistakable signs of long-accustomed habitation.

"This was the loveliest house of all," she thought mournfully, "and it had to be lived in!"

Yet this house betrayed signs of decay; the shutters on one side were fastened tightly and bricks dislodged from an unused chimney. Thurley could not refrain from taking an extra peek. She made her way to the side and crept up the steps gently to push at the carved old door with its tarnished knocker.

It opened! Taut with excitement and fearless, Thur-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ley felt that she ought to repeat a charm to save herself from being changed into a mouse or a rubber plant or some such helpless creation.

Inside the house burned a jewelled lamp; bulky objects were shrouded with covers. The boards creaked under her sturdy feet as she tiptoed about. A musty smell pervaded everything, and there were several doors, one of which she was about to open when a voice from the stairway made her halt.

"Ali Baba, it isn't four o'clock. How dare you come inside?" said the voice. Looking up, Thurley saw a bent-over lady in an old black dress, her yellowed fingers shining with rings as they clutched the banister. Her thin, pointed face with its restless eyes was looking over towards the opened door; she had not spied Thurley.

"Close that door, you stupid Ali Baba; never dare to come here again — where are you? Why" — this with a hysterical scream — "it's a child — a *child* —" and the little old lady began running down the stairs, beating her hands in the air, as if trying to strike at Thurley.

Thurley turned, throwing back her head in defiance and calling out, "Lock your doors, if you don't want company," making a hasty retreat at the same time.

Racing down the path, Thurley came into collision with Ali Baba, who was on his way to hitch Melba to the coupé.

"For cat's sake, where do you come from?" he demanded, holding Thurley by her arm.

Thurley, making sure the door of the house had closed and the little old lady vanished, whispered, "I thought I'd have a look, so I went inside and some one came down the stairs and said, 'Ali Baba, it isn't four o'clock!' — and when she saw me, she was cross."

THE GRAY ANGELS

Ali Baba dropped her arm. "Have you been *inside* that house?"

Thurley nodded. "Just in the hallway — she found me there."

"Land sakes and Mrs. Davis," Ali Baba said, smiling in spite of himself. "I guess you've done what no other kid in the Corners has ever dared to try. But don't do it again — children should not be seen nor heard, according to Miss Abby," and he brushed by her on his way to the barn.

Thurley was not satisfied with this answer. She went back to the Corners to find Philena's pale face pressed against the window glass watching for her missionary partner's tardy appearance.

"Philena, I have been in a funny brick house at the lake," Thurley said, "and I want your granny to tell me why it is so queer — and who that old woman is, and who is Ali Baba and why can't any one ever go there?"

Betsey Pilrig, who was passing through the room, stopped in amazement. "Have you been inside the Clergy house?" she demanded.

Thurley told her experience.

Betsey sought refuge in the nearest rocking-chair. "Then, listen, Thurley, for as long as you've come to stay a spell, you ought to know — and I guess I can tell you as well as Hopeful Whittier or Ali Baba. A long time ago, most thirty-five years, that house was lived in by Mr. and Mrs. Lemuel Clergy, of New York City, and they were worth more money than they could count, but all they cared for was Abigail, their daughter, and they were going to leave her everything they owned just because they loved her so much. But they always planned she would marry some one and be as happy as a queen."

Betsey paused for a properly doleful sigh. "As I was

THE GRAY ANGELS

sayin', my cousin, Hopeful Whittier, had married, and her husband, Jim Whittier, was drowned on the Great Lakes three months after their weddin' day. Hopeful came back to Birge's Corners, just like to die of grief. Mrs. Clergy heard of it and came to see her, and she says, 'My dear, come and live with us — Abby needs a maid of her own these days, and I think she'd like you.' Of course poor Hopeful didn't know about bein' a lady's maid and fixin' hair and lace and all that Miss Abby wanted done. But she was so heartbroken for Jim — they never found his body — that she was glad to go, and the Clergys were so good to her and Miss Abby so kind and willin' to show her how she wanted everything fixed that Hopeful was as happy as she could be — without forgettin' Jim.

"In them days the Clergy house — The Fincherie is its name — was never without guests. My stars, I've known as many as thirty extra people packed in there for a week at a time, and every other house on the shore the same with balls and basket picnics, charades and corn bakes and sailin' trips every minute in the day! But out of every one there — and there was the grandest and the finest in the land — there was no one half so beautiful nor gay nor kindhearted as Abby Clergy — no one could deny but what it was so. Her father's money and her fine clothes and jewels and her beauty didn't turn her head a mite.

"Let me see — I guess she was around seventeen when Hopeful first went there — girls was more advanced at seventeen than they are now. That fall, when it came time to close the house and go to New York, Abby Clergy tells Hopeful she wants her to come and live in their New York house the same as if she was one of these high-flyer maids they bring from Paris. Of course Hopeful

THE GRAY ANGELS

was mighty glad, for she had come to love Miss Abby and she knew Jim would have told her to go, if he could have done it. But before they closed the house, they give a harvest dance, so they called it — late in September it was — and I never did see such a time. The stables were packed with teams, and the steam cars ran a special train to South Wales for some of the people, and a fellow in New York sent the food, and champagne just flowed like the lake water. They had fiddlers from New York, and a florist with a load of flowers to fix up every room, and nobody else on the lake shore thought of going home until the Clergys' harvest dance was over.

“ Hopeful used to tell me everything that was goin' on and she often says, ‘ Betsey, that girl is too beautiful and good to live — I'm afraid she is goin' to be taken.’ I luffed at her and said she'd marry a fine gentleman, and Hopeful would watch their children playin' on the beach, but Hopeful always said no, she had a feeling things wouldn't be right. Now Abby Clergy was beautiful — just five feet tall, she was, and slight as a reed. She had big, black, satiny eyes and an ivory skin. It was natural for her never to have color and her hair was blue black, combed up high and fastened with a carved comb, and, when she luffed, Ali Baba said her teeth was prettier than her strings of pearls — real pearls they was, too — but I must tell you something about Ali Baba.

“ Nobody never thought of calling Joshua Maples anything but Josh, until Miss Abby named him Ali Baba after he started bein' her father's summer coachman and winter caretaker. One day he says to her, ‘ Miss Abby, don't you ever worry about anybody's stealin' this house. Just dismiss it from your mind the minute you leave here in the fall — and I ain't goin' to let any one steal you, neither.’ And she luffs and says, ‘ Why, who wants to

THE GRAY ANGELS

steal me?’ And that was a joke, because Abby Clergy had more beaux than she could remember their names, but she just smiled at them all and never cared any more for any particular one than she did for any particular rose that was bloomin’ outside her window. ‘A lot of thieves,’ says Josh — he was pretty smart in talking — ‘and I guess you’ll have to ask me as well as your Pa before I give my consent.’ That sort of tickled her and she jumped up and down and says, ‘You be Ali Baba, and I’ll let you watch over the forty thieves,’ and from then on he was Ali Baba to her, and nobody else ever called him any other name.

“So the harvest party was a grand success. But there come down from New York a stranger, Count Sebastian Gomez, who was introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Clergy as an Eyetalian nobleman with a lot of castles and such truck over in Europe and more money than he wanted. He was a fine-lookin’ fellow, tall and straight as an arrow, and he had a curled-up mustache and big, bold eyes that looked you clean through. He was dressed way up in G, and could talk a lot of these here foreign languages, and he wanted to kiss all the ladies’ hands and everybody thought he was the finest sort of fellow they could ever wish to see. . . .

“But Hopeful Whittier didn’t like him, and she says, when she saw how he was makin’ up to Miss Abby, flatterin’ her and kissin’ her hand and writin’ his name down for all the dances and starin’ angry-like at any other fellow who tried to look at her — she thought then that Miss Abby was makin’ a mistake. But if this count hadn’t eyes for any one but Miss Abby, Miss Abby didn’t have eyes for any one but the count. And Hopeful told me that, when she undressed Miss Abby that night, Miss Abby says to her, ‘Hopeful, I am a happy girl —

THE GRAY ANGELS

I'm so happy I don't know how to understand it — I've seen some one I could love better than my own dear father and mother.' Hopeful tried to warn her, she didn't know why, but Miss Abby wouldn't listen, and she sat up half the night, Hopeful says, thinkin' about him.

"The next day the guests went drivin', and the count managed to set beside Miss Abby when they rode and at the basket picnic and never to let her out of his sight. Abby's Pa and Ma seemed pleased about it, and they told their friends Count Gomez was of royal blood and he had letters provin' he was all he said he was. Well, that didn't win over Hopeful Whittier nor Ali Baba, but they didn't matter, of course. So Hopeful went back to New York with the family, and Ali Baba closed up the place. In the middle of the winter I got a letter from Hopeful sayin' that the count and Miss Abby were engaged, and all New York was talkin' about the foreign alliance, and how grand it was to marry a nobleman and be a real Eyetalian countess. She said Miss Abby was so happy she just floated about and that she was having trunks and trunks of dresses made because he was goin' to take her to his palace over in Italy and she wanted his family to think well of her. I didn't like the sound of it, neither, but I didn't think no more about it until in the spring, the last of Easter week, a coach and two bay hosses just came tearin' into the Corners at dusk and put up at the Button livery.

"Late that night Hopeful come up here lookin' as if she had seen a ghost. 'Good heavens, Betsey,' she says, 'we've brought Abby Clergy home a ravin' maniac!' Well, I didn't know what to answer, but she went on to tell me that just before the weddin' was to take place — on Easter Monday night — and all New York was invited to come and see an American girl become an Eyetal-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ian countess, didn't that scoundrel clear out and they find he had a wife and five children hidin' up in Michigan and that he wasn't nothin' but a common barber! It was a grand swindle — you know this idea of our girls marryin' them noblemen was kind of new those days and nobody was smart enough to ask all the questions that they would have done if it was to happen now. It seems he had taken a lot of Miss Abby's jewelry and she had loaned him money, him tellin' her his 'allowance' was bein' held up and such truck, and she, poor innocent lamb, believin' him!

"They didn't try to do nothin' to him; the shame was enough to bear without goin' any further. Hopeful said Mr. Clergy walked the floor all that night, and, finally, he told his lawyer, 'Let the wretch go, thank God the girl was spared the farce of a marriage.' So I guess the count and his wife and five children took the Clergy money and opened a shavin' parlor somewheres in Michigan and I suppose God took care of him when He got around to it.

"But it took Abby Clergy's reason for the time bein', and it killed her Ma. When word came about him bein' false and all, Abby was tryin' on her weddin' dress and she fainted dead away. When she come to and they undressed her, she fought 'em like a tiger and kept screamin' out that it was not so. Finally, they got her calmed down and the doctor came and she told him she never wanted to see any one again; she wanted to go and live for a whole year at the old summer home at Birge's Lake, where she thought she could forget her sorrow and bury her shame. But she didn't want to see nor speak to any one — not even her father or mother; she just wanted Hopeful to stay with her.

"I guess if she had asked for the moon they'd have tried to have got it for her. So they packed up her

THE GRAY ANGELS

things, and she and Hopeful came all the way to the Corners by team, and Ali Baba hurried up and made new fires in the house and Miss Abby was put to bed as helpless as a newborn child.

“For three months she had the real old-fashioned kind of brain fever. I guess they don't have it any more. Some say it has left her queerer than others; I don't know as to that; I only know that Hopeful never stirred from the Fincherie from the day Miss Abby came until she was out of danger, and then they had to tell her her ma had died six weeks before. Miss Abby had a relapse and never talked except when she was out of her head. She'd moan, 'Sebastian — Sebastian — I love you —' And she'd think Hopeful was that Eytalian fraud and she'd hold out her little hands to her and beg him not to leave her and to prove he never had no wife!

“When she got through with that, it was fall and she had never set eyes on no one but Hopeful and the doctor. She sent for her father, and in Hopeful's presence she said she wanted to live the rest of her life at the Fincherie with Hopeful and Ali Baba as her servants and she never wanted to take part in the world again, that she was not crazy, she knew her own mind. But she had a broken heart and she could not bear to let the world see all she had suffered.

“It 'most killed her pa — her hair had turned gray and she didn't weigh more'n a handful — but she kept beggin' him, and, finally, the doctor said time might change her, but it was no sense to argue with her now — so her father said she could stay there, and stay she has! It wasn't long after that when her poor father died, but Miss Abby never went to the funeral nor shed a tear. Seems as if all the love and tears God gave her were spent on that rascal. She had the lawyer sell the town prop-

THE GRAY ANGELS

erty and put the money in banks, and some of the furniture they sent on to the Fincherie, but she never let Ali Baba unpack it. And there she lived and there she lives — every day at four she drives in that old coupé with Ali Baba as the coachman. Outside of that, or maybe settin' on the back balcony when it's pretty hot weather, Miss Abby never shows herself. Nobody dares to go there neither. At first, the old friends tried to make her be herself, but she wouldn't listen or even see 'em. She's a sort of living death, like, wearin' the same old clothes and stayin' in her two front rooms year in and year out. Of course Hopeful has given up her life, you might say, to Miss Abby; she could have married many's the time, but somehow she's stayed faithful and so has Ali Baba. I guess it was meant to be so. Sometimes Miss Abby tries to thank Hopeful for all she's done and she gives her presents of money — but she can't never seem to take an interest in anything, and when it comes the anniversary of her weddin', Hopeful says she unlocks her trunks and keeps tryin' on all her weddin' dresses and cryin' soft and pitiful. The family lawyer has had doctors and doctors and mind-healers and faith-healers and all such people but nothing never done any good. She just lives in the house like a little old shadow, never hurtin' no one and doin' nothin' wrong — sort of hauntin' herself, that's the best way to say it. She's only fifty-five — but she seems seventy — sort of childish and sharp spoke, if things don't go to suit, and she's talkin' of putting up a big wall around the house so's nobody could even walk across the lawn. . . . Well, well, Thurley, so you got inside! "

Philena's hands were clasped in excitement. "Isn't it sad, Granny?" she said. "I want to cry."

Thurley shook her head. "I don't. I'd like to write a story about it and set it to music and rent a big hall.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Then I'd have people pay to come in and hear me sing it to them and I'd rather make the people cry."

Betsey Pilrig shook her head. "Thurley," she said, lapsing into old-time phraseology, "I guess there's no danger of your ever comin' in with your leg in your arm. I guess if you see your comeupment ahead, you'll manage to sing your way out of it."

CHAPTER V

So it was that in 1912 the second thrilling event happened.

Young Daniel Birge, proprietor of Birge's General Dry Goods Store, successor to Submit Curler, left his office, a built-up perch back of the shoe counter, to meet Thurley Precore at four o'clock.

The four clerks knew he was going to meet Thurley, that he had been meeting her and would continue to do so every pleasant afternoon, and they might as well ask any questions they wished before this hour, because business did not enter their handsome young proprietor's head again until he was forced to re-enter the store the next morning.

The clerks, three of whom were under twenty and in love with Dan and one of whom was nearing fifty and longed to put him "dead to rights," exchanged knowing glances as they watched Dan stalk out of the store humming a popular air and nodding a jaunty good night.

Birge's Corners naturally had expected something of Dan Birge — who wouldn't of the only son of a saloon keeper and man of money, according to the Corners' estimate, who had been brought up at the Hotel Button and permitted to do as he liked? Having so far escaped the gallows, Dan had proceeded to shock the natives as much as was possible. He began at sixteen, when, "like a streak of grease lightnin'," according to Prince Hawkins, he started in to educate himself by mail order courses,

THE GRAY ANGELS

having skipped school and defied teachers years without end. With the Birge determination, once started in any direction, Dan no longer haunted the barroom or the blacksmith's shop; he went to Betsey Pilrig's house, where her adopted daughter, Thurley Precore, welcomed and studied with him.

Lorraine McDowell, the minister's daughter, would have been only too glad to teach Dan Birge, the gossips had it, but Dan had never known Lorraine existed from the day Thurley had first "sung for her supper."

Too proud to admit such was the case, Lorraine had sensibly set to work to be as useful as any minister's daughter ought to be in a small town, and if she had her own particular form of heartache when she saw Dan and Thurley walking or riding together or taking supper at the Hotel Button, she kept it well concealed and smiled upon them and every one else alike.

After Dan had been "learning" for two years, while his father bragged that his son would outrival college professors — and all by mail, too — the older Birge died from an apoplectic stroke, leaving Dan his heir with the flourishing tavern, blacksmith's shop and real estate office to take in hand.

This was the only time that Dan had been known to consult any one — and every one knew Thurley had put him up to doing it, to say nothing of his being under age — but he went to the minister and they had a long talk, after which a sign "Closed" was across the saloon doorway, and carpenters came from out of town to make the place over into such a store as the Corners had never dreamed of possessing.

"My father was an honest saloon keeper, I guess," Dan had told Thurley, "but that business don't suit me — nor you," he added tenderly. "I'm going to keep

THE GRAY ANGELS

a dry goods store that will curdle all the milk in the South Wales emporium. I'm eighteen, Thurley, and when I'm twenty-one and rid of trustees, I'll ask you to marry me, and, when I'm twenty-two, we'll be married."

At which Thurley, admiring his audacity, had waived the question and began to suggest what lines of goods had best be carried.

It was only natural that the older generation could not understand a modern youth who would pay ten hard-earned dollars for a bull puppy, and then name her Zaza and pay two dollars more for a brass-studded collar and be willing to settle all claims for partially chewed up rubbers or boots for which the said Zaza seemed to have a penchant!

Neither did they see the necessity of Dan's trips to New York to buy goods. Submit Curler had never done it, and, if one could "learn by mail," why not buy as well? Nor did they see the reason for Dan's red and white canoe, the "Water Demon," fitted with an awning and striped cushions and a thirty-five dollar talking machine in the center of it, and why, when every one ought to be at work, Dan and Thurley would drift along the lake to the tune of "Dearie" or "Are You Coming Out To-night, Mary Ann?" while Zaza, unasked guest, would swim out and try to upset the cargo. And when Dan engaged two rooms and had a *private bathroom* installed at the Hotel Button and built a small balcony opening out of his sitting room, the younger generation fell down and worshipped blindly, while the older generation said a Birge never "built a cupola no place without wanting to get out on it and look down on every one," and, "there was as much sense in all his notions as there would be in putting a deaf mute at a telephone switchboard."

When Dan was quoted as saying he did not "feel right

THE GRAY ANGELS

unless his suits were made by a New York tailor," and, without consulting any one, bought a scarlet roadster and talked of building two-family houses as an investment, to say nothing of the twenty thousand dollar house with an iron deer in the front yard and steam heat that he would build when he married Thurley Precore — the older generation tilted their chairs back and recalled the story of the negro about to be hung, who said upon approaching the gallows, "Dis am gwine to be a powerful lesson to dis nigger!"

Yet the town had to admit that Dan built up the Corners more than any of his ancestors or contemporaries. He ventured money in a moving picture show and made it pay, mollifying the churches by turning over the proceeds of the Passion Play for a new carpet for a Sunday-school room and new front steps for the rival denomination. He installed an ice cream soda fountain in Oyster Jim's store, lending the old man the money, and started the vogue for modern sidewalks and a town clock — and even a manicure! There was no telling to what lengths he might have gone, if he had not been so in love with Thurley that she occupied his thoughts twenty-three and a half hours out of the twenty-four, but he managed to do wonders with the remaining half hour. The town often said he no doubt would have borrowed their farm teams to make polo ponies, and it was suspected that he was striving frantically to "get up a board of health."

Certain it was that Dan was not afraid to spend his money — some declared it was a hundred thousand and some a hundred and ten thousand. And, most glorious achievement of all, he liberally pensioned Submit Curler, whose eyes were too dim to tell basting thread from sewing silk.

THE GRAY ANGELS

When Dan would try to convince Ali Baba of some needed modern enterprise, Ali Baba would retort angrily, "Who made you so wise and your elders fools? Be careful or you'll catch brain fever and be as bald as a badger!"

To which Dan would answer good-naturedly, "No doubt of it — didn't you know that grass never grows on a busy street?"

Which would leave Ali Baba chuckling, "Land sakes and Mrs. Davis, if that boy hasn't a little Irish in him — dead dog eat a hatchet!"

No one could say Dan underpaid or cheated any person with whom he had dealings. His store had an up-to-date, live air and one could find bargains and articles which had never been seen in former days. Also, when travelling men came to sell him and he entertained them at his attempted bachelor apartments, they would suggest a game of penny-ante and something to drink, and the boy would inform them with no shrinking indecision, "I was raised watching men make fools of themselves," and bid them good night.

When he married Thurley Precore, the town gossiped, Dan would meet his match, and, in concluding their jeremiad, said they doubted whether Thurley would marry him after all, but if, for spite, he married Lorraine, who, goodness knows, would jump sky high if she ever had the chance, Dan Birge would be the same bully his father had been to his wife — there never was a Birge who didn't have to boss the job or quit!

None of this bothered Dan, not even the vituperation of himself when he encouraged a family of Sicilian boot-makers to rent one of his cottages and began to *pay to have his shoes shined*. Nothing bothered Dan except the fear lest Thurley should not marry him; that only both-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ered him at stray moments when a wilful impulse led her to break an engagement with him and run off to sing at some entertainment at South Wales.

As he strode along the main street, Zaza heeling him, he whistled "Bonnie Sweet Bessie" and shouted out a hullo to every one he passed, regardless of age or rank. There was something delightfully irrepressible about Dan. Perhaps the fact that every girl in town was or had been or was planning to be in love with him might have aided his buoyancy, as well as the knowledge that the older generation still looked at him with horrified disapproval and yet were powerless to control so much as a single one of Zaza's barks.

He made his way up the winding path leading to the burial ground, one of those picturesque spots with weeping willows, wild roses and a tottering old fence, and scraggly berry bushes growing insolently without.

"Oh, Thurley," he began, calling before he reached the summit.

"Ship ahoy!" sang back a strong, sweet voice. Presently he came upon a tall, blue-eyed girl with thick braids of dark hair. She was sitting under a willow tree, a book thrown carelessly at one side.

"Thurley, dearest," he began, sitting down and kissing her, "I thought four o'clock would never come."

"Did you make mistakes in change?" She put her hand on his shoulder. "If the clerks could see their lord and master now," and she rumbled up his hair.

"Bother the clerks and the whole darned town — I've made you promise to marry me, Thurley, and you're not going to make me keep it a secret. Why don't we tell every one right away? What's the use of keeping it to ourselves, when we are both sure of ourselves and the happiest things alive?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley laughed indulgently. "It's just me, Dan. I want to be terribly sure of myself."

He took her hands in his. "You are! You love me. You've always cared for me, as I have for you — 'way back ten years ago when you joined the gang! I have all the money we need and you may have it all. Say we won't keep it a secret! I'm dead tired of the Hotel Button; it gets on my nerves these days. Mrs. Hawkins has been mighty white to me — when I know what a spoiled nuisance I must have been — but she's a perfect litany of woe. I can hear her now, 'Wal, there wuz two funerals down to South Wales to-day — an' I meant to make a lemon pie but there wuz no lemons!' Or else she gets on another tactic — of borrowers — and she greets a chap with, 'Don't never talk about borrowers, Dan Birge; my curtain frames has been as far as the next township, and sometimes I ain't set eyes on my ice cream freezer from May to November!' And if I'm trying extra hard to think about business — and I'm really thinking about you — she starts in about somebody's second cousin's divorce and soliloquizes, 'We're all members of one human family and God never meant for man and wife to live together like cat and dog.' And I've never known it to fail that I was hurrying to get away to meet some one — and it was 'most always you — that she didn't drag me into her sitting room to see some of her damned — excuse me, Thurley — embroidery that she's going stone blind by doing and listen to her explain, 'These two doilies is just alike, only one is blue with flowers and the other is pink with stars and anchors — they're a weddin' present for Mrs. P. L. Flanigan — her second wedding, too; she's been on the stage since she could lisp, supported Madame Modjeska all through the West and then married a no good Irish comedian. . . . Oh, Dan, don't be

THE GRAY ANGELS

in a hurry! Look at this one — ain't it a work of art, if I do say so — clover is like sweet peas, awful hard to embroider natural.' ”

Dan paused, out of breath.

“ Yes,” Thurley said soberly, “ but she has her meals on time, and you eat them.”

“ My Swedish appetite is always with me, no joke; but what of that? Do you think I expect you to drudge like Prince Hawkins' wife? Not much. We are going to have a *maid*, no hired girl, but a trained maid, and we'll pay her five and maybe six dollars a week, and a wash-woman besides that.”

“ The town will say I'm lazy. Lorraine McDowell does all the work at the parsonage and visits the poor families besides.”

“ That's very fine in Lorraine, but she isn't my Thurley. You just couldn't pin yourself down to routine, could you? ” He looked at her admiringly. “ The best you can do is to pin the other chap down to it — like you did me. It is you who made me study and make good; I was a spoiled kid with more money than was good for me and no one with a grain of faith as to my future. They were holding their breath until I'd get into a scrape and they could go at me without gloves. Well, I didn't, unless they call loving Thurley Precore and being engaged to her a scrape! Of course they've patted me on the shoulder now and said decent things, but I'm twenty-two and a man, and they can't do otherwise. I guess you said about all there was to say when you told me, ‘ The best vault in which to keep your fortune is a good education.’ ”

Thurley leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. “ You're a wonder,” she whispered, “ but, really, wouldn't Lorraine make you happier? ”

THE GRAY ANGELS

His face clouded with an injured expression. "Why drag in Lorraine? She'd like to drag herself in," he admitted candidly, "and I guess every one knows it, but you don't fall in love to suit the other fellow — and I don't love Lorraine."

"She's so pretty and frail, and you're such a big, strong gypsy lad," mused Thurley, pulling sprays of feathery grass idly, "and I'm such a big, strong gypsy lass that we're not contrasts. We're too much alike, Dan; too selfish in the same way. Every one is bound to be selfish in some way or other, but when you both hit the same trail, it usually ends in a crash . . . please, wait until I finish. Then we're too fond of having our own ways. I'd like it if you became Daniel Precore instead of my becoming Thurley Birge; yes, I truly would. I don't want to promise to love, honor and obey any one — not a bit of it. I want to do what I dreamed of as a child — those dreams kept me alive, Dan. I want to sing, not in the town, but in New York, London, Paris. I've read of girls from the country who made good, and I can sing, Dan! It is not silly for me to say it. Besides, there is little else I can do!"

"I know it," he said in a muffled tone, "but why not sing just for me? I'll always listen."

"That's the trouble. I want to sing for thousands of strangers; I want to be famous, Dan, and yet, I want you for my pal. Don't you see that it doesn't go together as it should? For me to stay here as your wife, and for me to travel all over the world and be on the stage — and all that would go with it. I wouldn't be your wife unless I was sure to be the right wife. Dear old boy, you shrug your shoulders every time I try to explain it. But I'm different from Lorraine and the other girls. I'm selfish and generous all in one, quick tempered and patient by

THE GRAY ANGELS

turns. I hate to fuss about details. Domesticity drives me mad, poor Granny Pilrig can tell you! I'd sit up half the night to learn a song or read a book, and then I'd want to be hideously lazy the next morning. Sometimes I feel as if I were floating in the air, flying with absolutely divine ease and bliss just because of something deep inside myself — I haven't the faintest idea what it is. I can sing on hilltops and laugh in the grayest of drizzles. Everything can be in glorious purples and golden colors. And when the sun is actually bright and every one is congratulating every one on the weather, I find myself old, tired, black within. I want to cry, scream, go away from every one and neither speak nor move. That's what they call temperament, I understand, and you, Dan boy," Thurley's lovable mouth curved into smiles, "you could never say that is a good basis for a happy marriage — particularly to a gentleman with a 'Swedish appetite' and one who likes to be amused when he comes home tired out from a bargain sale of kitchen oilcloth!"

"Well, what is the basis for a happy marriage? Mrs. Hawkins says 'young folks should set down and talk about what they each like to eat before the engagement is announced!' I guess we can pass that up."

"Did you know what Mrs. Hawkins said about me, as being a good wife for you? It's funny! She told Granny and Granny told me. She said, 'I bet Thurley would dust the divil out of her cut glass and rustle into her georgette crêpes to get to a singing bee; but cook that boy a square meal, darn a sock, stand a bit of the Birge temper — never!'"

"She's just a meddlesome old woman," Dan began angrily.

"She's truthful and she likes us both. Don't let's rush ahead and be married until we are sure, and until you try

THE GRAY ANGELS

once more to see if you don't love Lorraine; it seems so cruel when she cares so hard."

"If she writes me any more silly notes about maple sugar socials on her everlasting pink paper and smelling of shampoo powders, I'll stop speaking to her," he declared. "Let's settle it to-day, Thurley — announce our engagement in the *Saturday Gazette*. Everything I have or ever will have is yours. I love you; I'll do what you say and be as you would have me. Darling, you've no one in this world to look out for you and I've no one to look out for. Let me take care of you! Please, I care so hard." His dark, handsome face was very close to hers and, suddenly, he laid his head on her shoulder, smothering a sob.

Thurley's sunrise, rose-red self went out to him in sympathy. "Does it mean so much?"

"Just — everything," was the incoherent answer.

"Then — I will." Tears came into her blue eyes. "I couldn't make you wait any longer. Look at me." She lifted his face between her hands and they looked into each other's eyes for a long, wonderful instant. "Dan, it may be a mistake, but I think I do love you even if I'm not willing to be a house-and-garden wife and stop my singing. . . . I'd perish if I stopped singing, so promise me you'll never ask it."

"Not in church and parlors and like that," he said unwillingly, "but my wife isn't going to sing on the stage."

Thurley's brows drew together in perplexity. "Well, maybe no one will ever ask me," she evaded. "We won't quarrel about it until they do — only I'd fight you pretty hard if you tried to stop my singing — it means even more than you do!"

"It won't after we are married," he asserted jealously,

THE GRAY ANGELS

"and I won't wait long for you either. We'll live at the hotel until the house is ready. I want to begin the plans to-morrow."

"Oh, Dan, a year anyway! Whatever will Granny do?"

"Move her into the hotel," he promised generously. "But you've got to marry me in September! Let's go over to Philena's grave and pledge it."

"I don't think I deserve you, you're so much in earnest, but I am sort of playing a lovely, interesting part — a wonderful part, too, but I'd really like to have strangers here to see how well I do it," Thurley tried to explain as they came up to a white cross newer than the surrounding markers on which was engraved:

Philena, beloved grandchild of Betsey Pilrig,
Young, beautiful and good, God numbered her among His angels
At the early age of fifteen!

"Now promise," Dan insisted, holding her hands.

"I promise," Thurley answered. Leaning over the cross, they kissed each other with tender solemnity.

"Shall we sit here and talk," Thurley asked, "or walk back?"

"Anything you like. You're so beautiful to-day, Thurley, I wonder if you realize how beautiful you are! I'm going to make you wear the proper sort of clothes and send right off for your ring."

Thurley glanced at her pink cotton blouse and white wash skirt in disdain. "I hate bothering over clothes and yet I'd like rich, weird creations just dropped from the skies. I never could sit and sew like —"

"Lorraine, I suppose!" Dan laughed in spite of himself. "I want to walk over to the *Gazette* office and put

THE GRAY ANGELS

our engagement notice in. I wouldn't want that to go by another week, if I had to get out an extry. I believe I'd make them get out an extry, too!"

"Did the *Gazette* ever get out an extry for anything?" she asked.

"The nearest they ever came to it was when Ali Baba was learning to ride a wheel and he ran into a barrel of tar pitch within half an hour of four o'clock! Come on, sweetheart, we can begin planning furniture."

Thurley lingered near an old tombstone with the engraving:

Naked as from the earth we came,
And crept to life at first,
We to the earth return again,
And mingle with our dust.

"I love a graveyard," she said pensively. "I like to sing in one."

"Sing for me now." Dan was anxious to comply with her slightest wish.

"This is a queer one to sing, up here," she answered, beginning,

The ship goes sailing down the bay,
Good-by, my lover good-by —

Dan was not thinking of the song; he was thinking of Thurley as his bespoken wife and of his and Thurley's life together. Singing was to be a minor thing which should take place while babies were rocked to sleep or perhaps on Easter Sunday for the special anthem. Dan had no idea of allowing her to remain a paid soloist — but it would do to tell her so later!

"Bravo," he said as she finished. "Shall we go along?" tucking her arm under his with a masterful air.

THE GRAY ANGELS

They trudged down the pathway to the road. Some children were picking the last berries from the dusty bushes; when they caught sight of Thurley, they ran towards her, saying,

"Miss Clergy heard you sing. Her carriage just went on. She had Ali Baba stop so's she could hear. She stuck her head out the window and asked him your name and Dan's name and he told her, and then she stuck her head in and he drove on."

"There's an old woman who ought to be ashamed to act like she has for years and years," Dan began.

But Thurley did not answer. Presently she said, "So — I had an audience even in a graveyard. Dan, do you know Miss Clergy never asks questions about any one? She must have liked my voice!"

"She'll never get the chance to hear it again! I'll race you to that first oak —"

Thurley shook her head. "Wait, Dan, I feel queer inside . . . as if something might come of it, I don't know just what."

"Are you going to let a crazy old woman's listening to you sing stop our getting to the newspaper office in time to announce our engagement?"

"Dan, do you realize that we are both 'Corners' people and they never do get along? A house or a store on the corner always attracts the most attention and gets the most notice paid to it and that is why your father's people founded these Corners and you have to be a Corners person — people just naturally pay you attention or you know why . . . and I'm a Corners person, too."

"I said I was not going to listen to your nonsense. I'll kiss you right in sight of this farmer's team," he warned. "You're going to belong to me and that is all that matters."

CHAPTER VI

"Gosh, you should see the tilt of his gold-banded cigar," was Ali Baba's comment to Hopeful the day the engagement was announced with a special heading, and also the fact that "Mr. Birge has begun plans for building his permanent residence on the beautiful site overlooking the lake. It is understood it will be named Fairview in accordance with Miss Precore's wishes and elaborate furnishings have been ordered from New York."

"I'm sorry for Lorraine," Hopeful answered, "but I bet a cookie 'Raine goes to see Thurley and takes her an embroidered set for a present. She's as brave as a lion and sweet as an angel! And I bet you a mince pie Thurley Precore isn't going to be happy."

"You ain't sayin' anything against Thurley?" demanded Ali Baba.

"Land, no, I set a sight by Thurley the same as by Lorraine, and I like Dan as well as either of 'em. It's just a mistake, Ali Baba, and you know what mistakes in love do." Her hand pointed in the direction of the upper front rooms. "Well, wait and see. Thurley was meant always to sing for her supper, the same as Lorraine was made to cook supper for a good man."

"I guess Dan ain't different from all men — made to *eat* supper no matter how much singin' or cookin' goes to gettin' the vittles on the table," was Ali Baba's emphatic summary of the situation.

Lorraine did call on Thurley and bring a daintily

THE GRAY ANGELS

wrapped blue tissue paper parcel containing one of her embroidered "sets" for the washstand of any conventional, country spare room. Lorraine had remained with the older generation in her standards of house furnishings and necessities.

The blue tissue paper matched her blue batiste frock with its crisp ruffles and the ribbon on her hat. Lorraine had made the dress and trimmed the hat, and it gave the impression of good taste and praiseworthy industry. There was nothing Lorraine could or would not attempt to do, once convinced it was her duty. She had the angelic sweetness of really unselfish natures and the accompanying stubbornness of which martyrs are made. She was a trifle weak, perhaps, during a crisis, and certainly lacked Thurley's aggression and power of argument. But Lorraine could sustain a situation — long after Thurley was forced, by temperament, to abandon it! Not even her estimable father dreamed that on the day Lorraine's mother died, the child soul of her had closed and grownups scratched on it in vain. It was her duty, she was convinced, not to mourn openly.

It had been her father's duty to have Lorraine brought up, and a maiden aunt's duty to forego the luxury of her severe but unhampered existence to see that Lorraine was properly raised. And it was Lorraine's duty to repay the bringing up and to take the place of the minister's wife and be the minister's daughter at the same time, to entertain deacons and visiting circuit riders and ladies' aid societies alike, to clean the best room for the missionaries and cook for them and pray for the conversion of the heathen all in the same day, to be not too prominent as the minister's daughter and yet to take the necessary lead in all things even unto making a house to house canvass to solicit her father's back salary or enough

THE GRAY ANGELS

knives and forks to serve the entire congregation at the baked bean supper!

Likewise, it was her duty not to think how pretty she was — that frail, elusive sort of beauty which does not impress the first time one meets it but which, after one has become familiar with it, fairly coaxes its way into the heart to remain. (No one having merely "glimpsed" Thurley would have ever forgotten her!) Because Lorraine had innocent, dove-colored eyes and the fairest of fair hair and tilted features with dimples placed irregularly about, she was misjudged as to her abilities. No one would have dreamed that the girl painstakingly wrote the burden of her father's letters and helped to soften his harshest of sermons, particularly those on predestination and heresy, and then turned into the kitchen to do the work of stout-elbowed women! Nor did that comprise all of her duty. To her fell those prosaic, uninteresting tasks such as taking old shoes to be mended in order to avoid buying new, or re-lining her father's threadbare coats or rummaging endless drawers to find a recipe for walnut catsup to satisfy some bromidic but important sister of the church.

It was her duty not to love Dan too hard and become a sentimental goose, she told herself as night after night she wrestled with her conscience, trying not to hate Thurley Precore as such small, dainty creatures, to every one's surprise, can hate. Of course Dan would marry Thurley or else marry no one; he would build the lovely home for her and buy her endless pretty clothes, for every one knew Thurley could not even darn stockings skilfully — she admitted it with one of her boyish laughs! He would also buy her a new automobile and a concert grand piano; and she would be his loved and trusted wife, mother of his children, and when Lor-

THE GRAY ANGELS

raine would come to this part of her reverie, the dimples would become quivering dents of emotion and the orthodox prayers her father fancied were being said would vanish completely. Of course, she would comfort herself, Thurley would never make Dan happy — she sang too well! Even this was salt in the wound, for was not Thurley paid soloist at her father's church and was not Lorraine obliged to sit Sunday after Sunday in the first pew and listen to Thurley's wonderful voice sing glorious anthems while behind Lorraine was Dan Birge, present only because he could take Thurley home? . . . And Lorraine had to say to him, because it was more of her duty, "Good morning, Dan; wasn't the solo wonderful? I think Thurley's voice is better all the time. Good morning, Thurley dear, we've just been saying what a marvel you are — good-by. Oh, good morning, Mrs. Turner, I want to thank you for the invitation for the quilting party — yes, I'd love to come — oh, thank you —" and so on, her heart thumping uncontrollably fast.

After greeting the congregation, she must go into the parsonage and cook dinner and try to eat as she listened to her father's small talk; she must wash the dishes and return to the church to teach the Bible class in the three o'clock Sabbath school — while all the time she knew Dan and Thurley were whirling about the lovely hilly country, stopping at some shady, brook-embraced glen to eat their luncheon and make love! And again, a cold tea at six and Lorraine must once more play scullery maid and then go into the evening service and know Dan was behind her waiting impatiently until Thurley's duties were ended and they might go back to Betsey Pilrig's porch or parlor and with mellow moonlight as witness — *spoon!* That was

THE GRAY ANGELS

the truth — spoon! Lorraine's flat little chest would heave excitedly and she would drop her eyes and force herself to count the dots in her frock — the third summer for it — to steady herself until she could glance up at Thurley in the choir loft and realize that she was the gladdest, loveliest thing in two worlds, a wild rose by all the poets' dictionaries!

So when she climbed the hill to Betsey Pilrig's house and Betsey went to call Thurley, Lorraine sank into the parlor chair and gave vent to a faint groan. If it were any other girl save Thurley, she could endure it more easily, but Thurley was so careless of his love, she so undervalued it! She heard Thurley humming a gay song and running down the stairs.

"You nice creature!" Thurley said carelessly, kissing her and trying to remove her hat at the same time. "Do take it off, 'Raine, it's such a climb up here. There, now I can see your eyes!" Thurley did not realize how unkind was this last. "Sit there — it's a comfy chair — well, I know what you've come to say," she blushed properly, "but if Dan could see me I know he'd be quite shocked, I look anything but a prospective young matron — 'fess up, 'Raine!"

Lorraine shook her head. "Dan wouldn't care how you looked as long as you would marry him," she began bravely. "You know that." It was harder than she had steeled herself to expect. Thurley was so careless of her great joy, she seemed a strange creature not belonging to any well-ordered town as she sat gracefully on the arm of a sofa, her dark hair braided about her head and the rumpled pink linen frock emphasizing the color of her cheeks.

"Well, maybe not. I'm hoping he'll always feel that

THE GRAY ANGELS

way. I didn't want to announce it, but Dan wouldn't wait any longer. Of course we've been half engaged for about two years."

"Yes, I know." Lorraine wondered if her voice sounded metallic.

"So I said yes, and now Dan is neglecting business. He was here at half-past eight this morning to ask if I wanted the walls tinted or papered; and he's gone right ahead and ordered a most extravagant ring — two carat in platinum — really, I don't approve for I'm so careless of all my things I'm bound to lose it. I'd rather he didn't start the house either. If I were only like you, I'd be delighted with the prospect of a pantry and a million shelves and drawers and the promise of any sort of range or fireless cooker and all the other appliances, but I'm not even interested."

"You're not? Why, Thurley, Dan will have to eat! What does interest you?"

"The garden and the color of my room and, most of all, my piano. For I'm to have a baby grand piano of my very own — I won't have to practise on the Sunday school piano any more. I'm half afraid I'm marrying Dan for that piano — don't look shocked — I'm not, of course, only it means a great deal."

"I can't imagine it! But of course I haven't your voice." Unconsciously Lorraine glanced out the window and across the road to where, sinking into comfortable ruin, stood a tottering old box-car wagon, the one in which Thurley had travelled all the way from Boulder, Colorado!

"I wish Philena were here, she'd have so loved a wedding," Thurley said presently, "and Granny wouldn't be so lonesome. Did I tell you that Dan says she's to have his old rooms at the hotel, unless she'll live with us? She

THE GRAY ANGELS

says she won't, so, of course, the other way is easy and lovely for her."

"He's very generous," Lorraine sighed. She held out her parcel. "It is just a well-wisher, as we say," she added. "Nothing, of course, like your other things will be, but I made it myself and perhaps you will like it because of that."

Lorraine had embroidered faint dreams and hopes of some day using the set in her house — and Dan Birge's — into the pattern. She had many such trifles tucked away in a chest of walnut drawers.

"You're a dear — I'm so clumsy with a needle — and it is beautiful!" Thurley said as she opened the package. "Just fancy you doing all this! Oh, Lorraine, I've told Dan, so many times, 'You ought to marry Lorraine instead of me — she'd make you such a good wife.' But men don't pay any attention to common sense when they're in love," she rattled on.

"Did you, really?" Lorraine put her little hand on Thurley's sleeve.

"Dozens of times."

"And did — did Dan ever answer you?"

Thurley turned to look thoughtfully at her small guest. "Well," she began awkwardly, "he said that he just happened to love me. I suppose it's that way lots of times — people love certain people whether it's best or not. When you come to see me, this set shall be in the best room I have — truly. And I want you to teach me lots of things you know — cooking and sewing and how always to be even tempered. Why, I'm cross as a witch one minute and jolly as a gypsy the next, and I do want to make him happy!" There was an earnest catch in her voice. "He's been so good to me — I've nothing to offer him but myself."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"That is all he wants," Lorraine made herself answer, reaching for her hat. "Are you going to sing any other place besides church?"

"I think so; Dan thinks not. After all, if you have some one who loves you very much and is always willing to listen to you sing, I suppose you ought to do as he says."

"How can you do anything he doesn't wish you to?" Lorraine asked passionately. "You'd be wicked — with him loving you so hard!" Then, ashamed of her confession, she said a confused good-by and hurried out in time to have a ride with a passing farmer.

Thurley took the "set" to show to Betsey Pilrig. "See what 'Raine has given your lazy Thurley," she said penitently. "I'm beginning to feel out of sorts with myself — I don't know why. As if I ought to have been making wedding clothes when she called or scolding over preserves or something like that, instead of staying upstairs and learning a new opera aria. Granny, aren't you sorry you let this long-legged, noisy creature stay in your house?" She knelt beside the old woman and clasped her arms around Betsey's waist.

Betsey shook her head. "No, because Philena loved you — and when Philena died, she told me to take care of you."

"And now I'm going to take care of *you*, and you're never going to work."

She rose and walked into the parlor, opening the sacred shutters wide and seating herself at the old-time organ with its carpet-covered pedals and apricot plush stool. She began playing chords, her blue eyes looking across the road, beyond the old box-car wagon, as if she saw visions of worlds still to be conquered — the worlds that the child Thurley had pledged herself to know.

THE GRAY ANGELS

There was little in Betsey Pilrig's house of value to Thurley, but mere furnishings never mattered. She was oblivious to shabby carpets, and, when she dusted the parlor furniture or set the table with nicked and varied styles of china, she was too busy singing or thinking of Dan to notice her actual surroundings. Nor did clothes bother Thurley — she was happy in a white middy blouse and a serge skirt and quite as beautiful as if she wore a Paquin creation. Besides, Thurley rebelled at taking help from Betsey Pilrig and her only way of earning money was limited. Even if one was the best singer and piano teacher in the township with the commendation of having learned: first, all Kate Sills knew, which ended with an E flat valse and "Dixie" with variations; and, second, all that a small city organist could teach her during his summer vacation spent in the Corners, and, last, all Thurley herself taught herself by diligent practice and "just coming natural to her" — even so, who wanted to pay more than twenty-five cents an hour to learn how to sing or play on the piano? So Thurley was forced to content herself with being organist, choir mistress and soloist in the church, with a dozen pupils to round out her income. Whenever she begged Dan to let her clerk in his store, he always asked her to marry him, thus blocking her desire.

With a restless gesture she closed the organ. "Hohum, I need Dan to make love to me," she ruminated. "I can't seem to make myself take anything seriously. I wonder why God made the Precoces stop off here instead of a city — things would have been different in a city. . . ." A moment later she mentally upbraided herself, "As if you weren't the luckiest girl in the world! You ought to get down on your knees and ask poor 'Raine to forgive you, and Dan and Granny, too. . . . Go out and

THE GRAY ANGELS

start a patchwork quilt this instant and don't let a single song be heard in this house until it is a third finished!"

But the scolding seemed to have no effect, for, instead, she reopened the organ and sang the opera aria she had just learned. As she finished it, she spied Miss Clergy's shabby coupé pausing behind the clump of maple trees.

"Why — that's the second time within a few days!" Thurley said delightedly. "Now — I wonder . . ."

With the exception of paying her wages or making some childish complaint, Abigail Clergy seldom spoke to Hopeful. It was an event to be summoned into those always lighted, seldom aired front rooms, crowded with keepsakes of a bygone generation, to stand before the chair of the imperious creature in her rusty black silk and hear her upbraidings over the fact that harmless urchins had been seen crossing the Fincherie lawn.

During the first tedious years of Miss Clergy's self-imprisonment, Hopeful, then younger and stronger of spirit, used to remonstrate against the order of things, urge a new doctor, a jaunt to the seaside, even if she saw no one. She tried to persuade Miss Clergy to wear new gowns, to turn off the penetrating gaslights which burned day and night no matter how bright the sun or how mellow the moon, to open the windows and let the fresh air revive her spirits, read a daily paper and, gradually, gently be swept back into the current of everyday living.

To none of these suggestions did Miss Clergy lend anything but a deaf ear. Her life had become her martyrdom and she did not propose to lose a single jot of it. With the exception of Ali Baba, who had proved himself faithful beyond a doubt, Miss Clergy had registered an everlasting hatred and distrust of men, it mattered not who. No clergyman dared enter

THE GRAY ANGELS

her door; her physicians were women, her lawyers acted as if they had been sentenced to the gallows and were merely enjoying a brief stay of execution. No man could ever command even her respect, she had told Hopeful; no woman could have her confidence or her love. She hated all living creatures. And as the years passed with Miss Clergy a trifle more wrinkled of skin, whiter of hair and distorted of mind, Hopeful ceased making efforts to change her viewpoint. Indeed, she, too, fell into a sort of charmed, even existence, free from material want or keenness of interest in the world without. The Clergy fortune continued to multiply. All Miss Clergy had to do was figuratively to wave a yellowed, jewelled hand and a barrel of gold was at her command. Yet no repairs were permitted to be made at the Fincherie, not even a new coupé nor for Ali Baba a new livery. And when, one by one, the old mares would die and the purchase of another was inevitable, Miss Clergy would fly into a rage.

When, perforce, Hopeful demanded to clean the two front rooms, Miss Clergy would scold sharply, as she moved into one of them, waiting with added martyrdom until she could fly back into the other to complain about some minute change in the placing of a book or the position of a chair.

The rest of the house, however, was left to Hopeful's guardianship, and, when she tried to persuade Miss Clergy to come downstairs and sit in the pleasant parlors or eat in the little breakfast room, Miss Clergy would demand,

"Do you want to find another home for yourself, Hopeful? Oh, you do not. Then leave me in peace — at least I am mistress of my own house."

She never spoke to Ali Baba save the daily, "An hour's

THE GRAY ANGELS

drive, Ali Baba, not too fast," and by the world at large she was never even seen. No charity appeal softened her selfish, useless vigil; no cause, however worthy, could lessen her hysterical mimicry of disease. No one was the better for the existence of that small, sinister person with a withered heart, since it was no longer even bruised.

And when, on the evening of the day Miss Clergy had stopped for the second time to hear Thurley sing, she rang the bell long after Hopeful had served her a tray supper and said almost civilly as she entered, "Sit down, Hopeful. I want to ask you about a girl named Thurley Precore who sings — who she is and how she earns her living and how long she has been here," Hopeful put her tired hand to her head, wondering if she had heard aright.

With a tyrannical smile Miss Clergy repeated her questions.

So Hopeful found her voice after a bit and began the story of Thurley's singing for her supper up to the time her father died when the first snow flew and how out of charity Betsey Pilrig had taken her into her home to live with Philena.

"Of course Betsey didn't have much, but what she had she divided between Philena and Thurley, and she's said to me that she looked on Thurley as the boy and Philena the girl. Because Thurley is one of those that'll get themselves heard, if they're born in the backwoods. There wasn't much to Philena but her big eyes and her crutch, and you ought to have seen the way Thurley looked out for her and toted her on her back, pretending she wasn't heavy! My land, I've watched those children play together until I was late with my work!"

"What did they play?" interrupted Miss Clergy.

"Missionary and play-actin' and all such stuff, and Thurley made it up. No matter what Thurley made up,

THE GRAY ANGELS

Philena said she liked it. I never will forget the Christmas Philena made a travellin' chest for Thurley out of an ol' tea-box she got down to Submit Curler's store! She fitted it up inside with cretonne pockets and a lookin' glass and wrote on a card, 'For Thurley when she goes to be a missionary!' Wasn't that the queerest thing for a young un to think of? Philena was to be a missionary, too, and Thurley was to sing the songs. Oh, Thurley can sing! When they graduated from the high school — Philena didn't live long after that — Philena read a graduating essay and Thurley sang a song and there wasn't no applause for Philena, except what me and Betsey and Ali Baba mustered up, but everybody stamped their feet to have Thurley come back and sing. There was a sort of tableau, too, at the church, for Children's Sunday — seven children were the seven days of the week, and wasn't it queer that Thurley was Saturday, Philena was Sunday and Lorraine McDowell, Monday?"

"What of it?" snapped Miss Clergy.

"It means that 'Saturday's child must work for a living' and Thurley said, 'That's me — Saturday.' And 'Sunday's child is full of grace,' and certainly Philena was, and 'Monday's child is fair of face,' and nobody would ever want to see a prettier child than Lorraine was — or is —"

"Never mind her! Go on about Thurley," Hopeful was ordered.

"It was the next month Philena died, and Betsey spent half she had in the bank to bury her the way she thought she'd like — a lavender coffin with quilted satin and she wore her graduating dress and a jet hair ornament that Thurley give her and Thurley sang at the funeral and never broke down onct! Some say Thurley Precore never loved no one, but I know she loved Philena, and

THE GRAY ANGELS

since then she stayed on at Betsey's and earned money singin' and teachin' piano and it seems as if she couldn't put her mind on nothin' else . . . I dunno —"

"Who's the — boy?" There was a rasping tone in her voice. "The boy she is engaged to marry?"

"Why, Dan Birge —"

"Birge —" memories stirred in the numbed brain.

"Grandson of the one you knew, Miss Abby. Dearie me, you've lost count of years!" Hopeful shook her head.

"Will she be fool enough to marry him?" Miss Clergy insisted.

"He'll marry no one else, I guess. Seems as if he's always cared for her and she's made a man of him, too."

"That will do, Hopeful. The omelette was like leather and don't put flowers on my tray again." Miss Clergy's dismissal was as brusque as her greeting.

Below, Ali Baba and Hopeful exchanged opinions. After thirty some years of seclusion Abby Clergy had begun to care to hear of some one else.

"Well, if any one else could make her care, it would be Thurley," Ali Baba deduced, while Hopeful paused in the wiping of the last pot to say sagely,

"If she could, she'd have Dan Birge blown off the face of the earth, just because he wants to marry Thurley."

"Some wimmen takes it harder'n others," muttered Ali Baba whose patience with Miss Clergy was not of the same duration as his cousin Hopeful's.

For the first time in thirty-some years Abby Clergy actually opened the shutter of her window and let in the summer breeze. She drew a chair close beside it and rested her thin arms on the window ledge. A flush in the yellowed cheeks betrayed her excitement; her harsh

THE GRAY ANGELS

voice was trying to hum the aria Thurley had sung so carelessly that afternoon. By chance it was the solo aria in the last opera Abby Clergy had seen. She had been escorted by Sebastian Gomez the pretender, and every one had turned opera glasses to look at this beautiful American girl who was to marry a supposedly dashing nobleman, according to newspaper gossips. What time and happenings had occurred since then! And Thurley, who had stirred the last spark of life in the embers of Miss Abby's heart, was to marry a country bumpkin, a Birge, a storekeeper probably, a slangy, serge-suited, whistling nuisance with an odious bulldog and a new-fangled automobile — never! Not if the Clergy fortune could prevent it!

CHAPTER VII

Busied with her "penance" of quilting, the next day, Thurley was summoned by a peremptory rap at the side door. It was Ali Baba, his shabby silk hat laid across his heart after the fashion of pictures of cavaliers which he had chanced to see in old-time novels.

"I've an invitation from the queen," he said with a bit of dry humor. "After she heard you sing, she wants to tell you how you please her. Don't refuse or we'll all be beheaded in the tower! Thurley dear, I'm a silly old man — what I mean is that Abigail Clergy wants you to drive with her. She won't harm you — she's as sane as you or I — only she heard you sing and she liked it. For land's sake and Mrs. Davis, don't refuse! We'd lose the one chance of maybe makin' her be her own self again. Never mind a hat; just go out to the coupé and drive about with her. Let her talk to you!" The hand which held the silk hat trembled from excitement.

To have lived with a haunted creature for over thirty years and suddenly have that haunted creature express a normal desire was nothing less than terrifying to the two aged servitors.

"Me? Drive with Abby Clergy? Ali Baba, sure it's not a joke? Come? Of course I will," and with no more thought for her "penance," Thurley danced out of the house, down the flagstone walk and with an abrupt, determined hand opened the door of the curtained coupé.

Trembling with excitement herself, Miss Clergy managed to extend her hand. "I wanted to tell you some-

THE GRAY ANGELS

thing, Thurley Precore," she began. "Ali Baba — an hour's drive — not too fast!" this a discreet hint to Ali Baba that eavesdropping was not to be tolerated, and, as Melba stalked down the road, injured to the last buckle of her shining harness at the extra weight thrust upon her, Thurley turned an unaffectedly delighted face to Miss Clergy and said,

"What in the world is it? You've no idea how larky it is to drive with you — I've made up stories about you ever since I found my way into your house years ago — the side way — and you ran after me," her clear, musical laugh seemed to clear the atmosphere of excited unrest.

"So it was you! Strange . . . never mind myself — tell me, have you always sung like this?"

"Of course! I can't help it any more than to breathe."

"You have no relatives — no one nearer than Betsey Pilrig?"

Thurley admitted sorrowfully that she had not.

"Nor money?"

"Not a penny! But I'm the happiest pauper alive."

"I hear you are to marry," Miss Clergy's voice broke as she said the words, "the Birge boy? My dear, I'm not so old as I seem, but I had a great sorrow when I was younger than you and it changed everything. I've never chosen to explain to the world, since I was not dependent on it, and if I preferred to live alone and brood, it was my right. But this much do I know, and because you are young and have a God-given talent, I shall tell you. You are a fool — as great a fool in your way as I was in mine to trust the man who cheated me — to marry a country boy and try to be content. You'll be running off with the first goodlooking stranger that comes your way . . . ah, but I know, times never have

THE GRAY ANGELS

changed women's hearts. They eloped years ago by a team of fast horses, and now they do it by the aid of an automobile, and in a little while they'll be eloping in a flying machine. You see, I'm not so queer as people say, I've kept up a bit! Birges have bad tempers. I knew the grandfather, and they are Englishmen regarding their wives. You can sing and you are young and spirited; you should go away to New York and have teachers and the chance to become great. I am not telling you this to break your engagement, but from your eyes I see that singing is as dear to you as Daniel Birge or you would have stopped me when I first mentioned his name. Is that not so?"

"Quite," said Thurley simply.

"Then remember this! Should some disagreement come between you two, I could not say what," she shrugged her black shoulders and waved the withered hands with their flashing rings, "say, if you wanted to sing and he tried to prevent you from so doing — as all beasts of men try to cheat women of the things dearest to them," her teeth made a grinding, unpleasant noise, "if you should be brave enough and big enough, as I think you would be, to tell this boy to go his way and you with your voice would go yours, come to me, Thurley! I may be odd, but I am very rich, and your singing has made me realize I'm a lonesome old woman. I'd like nothing better, my child, than to take you to New York to make you the success God intended. Don't thank me. It is not goodness of heart — not half so much as revenge. If you came with Dan Birge's child in your arms and told me he was out of work and you needed aid, I'm afraid I would have a deaf ear. But I want to cheat some man of the woman he loves, to turn the tables. This boy loves you in his over-colored,

THE GRAY ANGELS

peasant way. It would break his heart, as nearly as any man's heart can be broken, to have you leave him. It would sting his pride and scratch his vanity —"

"But Dan is true blue, Miss Clergy! I couldn't hurt him to please any one."

"No, but if he forbade your singing — as he will — and you were lucky enough to find it out before you married him instead of afterwards — what then? Would you meekly lock your piano and follow him into the kitchen? What then? Speak up, my girl! Remember, I am not trying to cause trouble. I ask you only for the promise. Should you have an argument with your — your lover, come to me; do not weaken! I am rich — and lonesome — and your voice has made me know I want to love some one again — just before I die. I'll let you out here, my dear. You can scamper back. Don't forget, will you, Thurley?"

She pressed the tube for Ali Baba to halt. Thurley, bewildered, impressed, angered, yet amused, all in one, knew that yellowed lips brushed her fresh cheek, and, when she looked up to say good-by, there were tears in Abby Clergy's restless eyes!

Fate sometimes pursues people, even if they are not willing to be pursued. Certainly it was fate pursued Thurley Precore. As she came to Betsey Pilrig's gate tingling with excitement, inclined to laugh and then to protest against the abuse of Dan, and, finally, to cry a little like a true woman, she glanced in the letter-box to find an offer from Rufus Westcott, manager of the South Wales county fair. He asked if Thurley would sing during fair week at five dollars a night, and to let him know as soon as possible.

Betsey Pilrig wondered why Thurley stayed so long at the gate reading her letter. But only Thurley knew!

THE GRAY ANGELS

Miss Clergy had spoken barely in time. An hour before and Thurley would have said to Dan,

"Please let me. You can take me home every night — I want to — there's no harm and it's such a lark — please," and would have ended in being coaxed out of her desire.

But she marched into the dining-room, and, sitting at the table, opened a writing pad and picked up a pencil. Fate did not even let her wait for ink! She accepted Mr. Westcott's offer with pleasure and would send him her programme of songs inside of two days.

Signing her name, she glanced up to see Betsey Pilrig standing in the doorway.

"Thurley, you look up to mischief! Where have you been?"

Thurley sealed the envelope with an emphatic little thump, "I can't tell you until I've told Dan."

"I guess as long as you tell Dan first, I can wait," Betsey answered.

But had she witnessed the telling she would not have complacently made beaten biscuit, wondering if Dan was coming home for supper with Thurley.

For Thurley, racing impatiently back from the post office to keep her daily tryst with Dan, had come upon him returning from the cemetery.

"You're an hour late," he complained.

She started to explain and then something kept "tick-ing" these words into her head like an insistent clock, "I am rich and lonesome and your voice has made me know I want to love some one again." So all she answered was,

"Must I account to you for every moment?" flinging herself down by the road and playing with Zaza.

Although he felt he ought to tower down at her in

THE GRAY ANGELS

conventional, jealous rage, Dan seated himself meekly beside her. "Why, I didn't mean it that way! Only you're never late and I worried. I was afraid you were hurt. You are going to be my wife and I've the right to ask questions. What's wrong, dear? Your eyes are like stars and your cheeks as pink as your dress! You look as if you'd found some one you liked better than you do me," he could not refrain from adding. "Do you know I'm terribly envious of any one you like at all? I'd like to lock away all your smiles for myself."

"Silly," reproached Thurley, as she trailed a stick in front of Zaza. "As if I couldn't have personal errands. I don't go asking you where you are every minute in the day —"

"I'd rather you did than to seem not to care." He tried to put his arm around her, but she drew away.

"Don't! It's terribly childish to make love at every fence corner. Let's be dignified — not boy and girl style! I don't like it any more."

"You used to," he objected.

"Oh, no, it was just the young of me that liked excitement. There isn't any excitement at the Corners unless the gods happen to favor one. I've been thinking for a long time I should not have been so lazy as I am, staying at Granny's and hardly earning my 'keep.'"

"Have you been reading more silly books?"

"Dan, suppose we quarreled! Well, just suppose we did — and Miss Clergy, the funny old lady at the Fincherie, took it into her head that she wanted to give me a chance to learn how to sing and talk and dance and all the things that are just crying inside of me to be learned! Oh, Dan, dear, don't look like that! I'm just supposing. And suppose I decided to let her take me to New York — and our engagement was broken, would you care so

THE GRAY ANGELS

terribly?" The latent maternal in Thurley was asking the question; it lacked the usual ruse of the vapid coquette.

He looked as if he scarcely comprehended what she had said. Then he answered, "Don't suppose that way. Something inside me would just *die*."

Thurley's handsome eyebrows drew together in a straight line. "Dan," she added a moment later, "I've promised Rufus Westcott, the county fair manager, to sing at the South Wales fair every night. Do you mind?"

"Never!" he cried, standing up. "So that's what has caused this talk? I'll not let my future wife sing at a county fair with painted dancers and half-drunken fakirs! What do you think I am?"

"I'm not your wife yet," she retorted, angry youth rising to face angry youth, and tender love quite helpless between them! "I've written and promised—I just posted the letter."

"You didn't even ask me!" he accused.

"Why should I ask you?"

"Because I love you! I'd ask you about anything I was going to do, you know that. How much did he offer you? I'll double it, if you say no."

She shook her head. "If you gave me five hundred dollars, I'd not be bribed. It isn't the money. It's the joy of singing to people—but you can't understand."

"You belong to me and you shall not do it!" The Birge temper was gaining control of the good-natured, generous boy. "Do you hear me?"

"I belong to whom I choose! Don't look at me like that! Do you think I'll marry a man so narrow-minded that he refuses me the chance to sing in respectable fashion? Better women than I have done so." The Pre-

THE GRAY ANGELS

core temper was matching the Birge temper without hesitation.

"I won't give my consent," Dan said in a dangerous tone. "If you sing at that fair, by God — I — I won't marry you!" Then his face went white as soon as he had spoken. "Oh, no, of course I," he began piteously, "Thurley — listen — don't do it, will you —"

Thurley's eyes were closed for a moment. She saw in tempting panorama the old coupé with Miss Clergy saying good-by and adding, "I am rich and lonesome and —"

She opened them to look with impersonal scorn at Dan Birge. In that brief interlude he became a presuming, ill-tempered, small-town man who would drive her into becoming an equally ill-tempered, small-town woman — she would have none of it!

"Very well," she answered, drawing off the seal ring which she was wearing until the solitaire was ready, "you've said it — not I. Good-by and I hope you'll be happy."

She turned and walked in the opposite direction. At first Dan started to follow; then he threw back his head with the same insolent toss as Thurley's, and, squaring off his shoulders, walked in the direction of the hotel. Of course their engagement was *not* broken; that was too absurd even to fancy. But Thurley must know, first as well as last, that when she married Dan his wishes were to count. Lovely, wilful Thurley-girl, what a wonderful time of it they would have making up! Of course nothing would *really* interfere with the September wedding — impish and unwelcome thought. It was just that Thurley must see he was in the right, and, when she sang, it would be in her husband's house — the twenty-thousand-dollar house with the statue of a deer in the

THE GRAY ANGELS

front and a pergola and steam heat! He would go up to see Thurley that same night and they would begin all new again and he would write Westcott on a typewriter and on the store official paper and explain that Miss Precore could not keep her engagement. His Thurley singing at a county fair — never!

CHAPTER VIII

Then the second thrilling event happened! Like all thrilling events it happened with magical speed. First, it was carefully reported by Ali Baba and Hopeful that Thurley Precore had unceremoniously arrived at The Fincherie and demanded to see and speak with Miss Clergy. If some one had meekly sent in a note, it would have been called presumption itself. But to demand to speak with Miss Clergy and to gain one's point as well was nothing short of marvellous!

For Thurley had been admitted and had rushed up the winding stairs like the "younger generation who come knocking at the door." She had entered the mysterious front room and remained there, while Hopeful and Ali Baba remained below in a state of fearful curiosity.

Whatever the conversation was it was of interest to Miss Clergy. An hour later Miss Clergy saw her guest to the door and then called Hopeful and said that she was taking Thurley Precore to New York by the morning train. She wished to have a trunk — this with a slight quaver in her voice — packed with the best of what she had; she would buy a new wardrobe as soon as she reached the city. She wished no questions asked nor did she wish Hopeful to answer any questions until they had boarded the train. Hopeful was to have her cousin Betsey Pilrig come to live at the Fincherie, because Thurley Precore wished to have her provided for

THE GRAY ANGELS

— her voice softened at Thurley's name — and they were liable to be away for a long time.

Gasping, twisting her apron, dizzy with trying to comprehend this new order of things, Hopeful had insisted, "But what am I to say after — after you have boarded the train?"

"Say Miss Clergy has taken Thurley Precore to New York to have her study for grand opera," Miss Clergy said, after a moment's deliberation. "And the engagement with Dan Birge is broken for all time."

Meanwhile, at Betsey Pilrig's house, Thurley was kneeling before the gentle old lady and telling in her rapt, dramatic fashion,

"I'm going, Granny. I found out all in a moment that I didn't love Dan as I should. Of course it hurts a little, but they say it is good to have a love affair terminating badly, if you're to sing in opera. Anyway, I'm going. You are to stay at the Fincherie and be taken care of forever and ever, and, as soon as I'm famous, I'll pay Miss Clergy back for all her kindness and we'll have a lovely, white house, you and I, where I'll come for vacations. It's so different from singing in church, isn't it?" She laughed the innocent laugh of pure joy. "Oh, I'm not afraid I'll not make good. Something tells me I shall — the same as the day I told Philena that cripples could be conquerors — remember? And, Granny, it is really better for Dan, and, if he comes here to-night to see me, say I've gone to bed and I'm too tired to be called . . . no, no, I'm sure of myself! Granny dear, don't let the old box-car fall to pieces, I want it as a souvenir. When I build my beautiful house, it shall stay close beside it. It was my home, you know!" The scarlet lips quivered for an instant.

"But are you happy, Thurley, giving up a good man's

THE GRAY ANGELS

love, going with that woman to New York?" The gentle, narrow mind could not comprehend this whirlwind of events, strange and astonishing.

"I'm happier than I've been in years! There must be gypsy in me. I'm happy at the thought of travelling again! The old days, even the hungry, cold ones in the box-car wagon, were happier than the days of being fed and warmed but made to sit in school and sew my stint afternoons. Don't you see, Granny dear, I'm different; and when a person finds that out for sure and some wonderful thing happens to them like Miss Clergy's hearing me sing that it's the right thing to go on and follow the trail? Tell Dan — no, I'll write him, bless his old heart, he didn't know I halfway wanted to refuse to marry him," Thurley sobered as if momentarily contrite.

Betsey Pilrig looked at her with lack of comprehension. "Maybe you're right — maybe you're wrong. I've no power to keep you. What did she say when she offered to take you away?"

"So many things! I could travel abroad, and, if I worked very hard and the right person trained me, she thought I would be famous and she is to be my god-mother as it were. The only condition was not to marry for twenty years — that was easy to promise. For I'll never love any one but Dan, and all of me didn't love him. So I gave my pledge. She would not have taken me unless I did. She's bitter, Granny, because of her own affair. She likes to think of cheating a man of me — poor dear! Why, I didn't mind the promising."

"I don't like the condition," Betsey said, gravely. "You're young and you don't know all that is in your heart any more than the world knows of your voice. That wasn't fair of her!"

THE GRAY ANGELS

But Thurley in a state of ecstasy refused to listen. She fell to packing, and, when Dan came an hour later, Betsey was forced to send him away with the unsatisfactory message that Thurley was busy — she would see him later.

After which Betsey Pilrig watched the light of his roadster twinkle into nothingness. Moonlight called her attention to the box-car wagon. She visualized the long-legged, ragged child Thurley who had sung for her supper — and got it — at the Hotel Button, and the worthless parents. Then she saw Philena limping eagerly about in Thurley's train as they played missionaries; she saw Thurley in her white dress on Children's Day when she was made to speak the part of Saturday and declared joyously that she did not care, she really wanted to work for her living. She saw a taller, lovelier Thurley singing at Philena's funeral. Then she saw Dan and Thurley in the first flush of courtship, with Thurley all blushes and happy songs and four or five engagements a day, while Dan's business ran itself . . . well, that was at an end. In her simple fashion Betsey realized the girl Thurley would never return nor would Dan Birge remain a light-hearted, whistling boy. As for Abby Clergy, some folks might call it generous on her part to take Thurley to the city, but Betsey called it using youth as a crutch and a revenge and she wondered what Miss Abby's parents would have said if they had known.

"It's late, Granny love! Tell me — did he mind?" Turning, she found Thurley waiting to say good night to her.

She came and peeked over Betsey's shoulder at the old wagon. "Good-by, funny home," she kissed her finger tips to it. "I sha'n't forget you — not even if

THE GRAY ANGELS

I drive into the Corners the next time in a limousine with a footman."

After Miss Clergy and Thurley had left the Corners, Hopeful and Ali Baba took the day off to get out an extra of their own as to what had happened.

" . . . dressed in a black silk forty-year old she was and a hat to match and all her rings on her fingers and the same hobnail boots," Ali Baba informed Corners loungers, " but as chirp as if she'd never gone to ruin for over thirty years about an Eyetalian barber — poor Miss Abby! And I bet my hat, she'll have new clothes and be as up to snuff as they make 'em when she gets to New York. . . . Thurley? Oh, her own self with a pink dress and a white shade hat and Miss Abby sayin' to her, 'We'll only be shabby a little while longer. It isn't goin' to take us long to learn new ways.' Thurley's eyes was as blue as the sea and she kept starin' out beyond everybody and goodness only knows what she was thinkin' . . . anyhow, they're gone! We've orders to close the house and blest if she didn't have our cousin Betsey Pilrig come to live with us — as good a thing as Miss Abby has done in over thirty years — for it will take the heart from Betsey to lose Thurley, too! When Dan Birge knows that Abby Clergy has stole his girl and she isn't goin' to marry him no more'n a terrier'll leave a badger hole, I guess for the first time in history a Birge will be so sore he'll have to ride in a rubber-tired cab! " Conscious of being the courier of a thrilling event, Ali Baba nonchalantly borrowed tobacco and strolled on to spread the glad tidings.

Even a mystery or a haunted lady becomes a bore after a certain time. It is like a jolly week-end guest who, without invitation, spends the entire season in one's

THE GRAY ANGELS

only and best pink room. So had Miss Clergy become a nonentity to the town—"a pity," the older people said, "a pill" retorted the younger.

Which explained somewhat the shock it gave the town when news of her flight to New York with Thurley was announced. "How could that poor soul ever get up and get?" the town asked itself. The truth of the rapidity was that because she had been dormant for so many years—and had endless money—any activity would either be of microscopic importance or stupendous haste; there could be no middle, sane course of action. With Thurley Precore as the incentive, the former course was out of the question. It was like the sleeping princess upon rousing—she lost no time in finding out the state of mind towards him who kissed and wakened her. So Miss Clergy could not leave town fast enough to please herself. She trembled lest Dan Birge, through customary masculine knavery, trick Thurley into marriage and cheat her newly-throbbing heart of its long-awaited revenge.

Three weeks later, when the town was still agog, saying they guessed even "the crabs were laughing with their claws" at the thought of a Birge being handed the mitten, two pillars of the church vowed that Dan Birge had proposed to Lorraine McDowell and been accepted; that he had spoken to her father about the wedding. So he could not have cared so much or else he was marrying Lorraine out of spite. Lorraine would be, at any event, mistress of the twenty-thousand-dollar house and would wear both the solitaire and the wedding band Dan had planned to give Thurley Precore.

The news rivalled the amazement over Miss Clergy's recovery. The town began to "lot" on whether or not Thurley, with all her notions of being a fine singer, would not be sorry some day.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"He should have married Thurley to meet his equal," Ali Baba declared. "'Raine has as much chance with him as a paper-shell almond against a hickory nut! Yes, we got a letter from Thurley — she said they was well — that was about all!"

But the town never knew quite all about Dan's sudden engagement to Lorraine nor Lorraine's acceptance of Thurley's suitor. They never knew that Dan, white-faced and with a strange, red light in his eyes, had come to Lorraine to plead with her that she marry him.

To Dan's despairing anger of youth, Lorraine yielded because of her own despairing love. "I know you love Thurley," she said, when he scarcely embraced her. "You want to show her some one loves you enough to marry you . . . and you knew I always cared. Dan, will you learn to care afterwards? I'll be the best wife I can! I'll do everything you want me to do!" She wondered why he winced at the words.

He was thinking of Thurley's wild rose, defiant, adorable self. It had all happened so quickly that he wondered if it were not some hideous, unfair nightmare from which he would soon waken — and meet Thurley!

But as he looked at her gentle face he knew it was reality; that for over three weeks Thurley had been away from the Corners, Abigail Clergy's fortune at her disposal to prove that she could sing and the whole world would listen.

Only that hastily scribbled note was left him — he wondered some days when he was trying to attend to business and not act conscious of the glances of his clerks and customers, whether he might not burst out saying the words,

THE GRAY ANGELS

Dan —

Miss Clergy has promised to take me to New York and let me study. I was telling you the truth about it. I know it is for the best, we could never make each other happy — forgive and forget,
THURLEY.

“Well — I always liked you, 'Raine,” he forced himself into saying. “And it's mighty sensible — I guess your father will say yes.”

“He may think a marriage for — spite,” she added half inaudibly, “isn't right, but I'll marry you anyway, Dan,” this to his surprise.

“It hurts to love so hard, doesn't it?” he asked impersonally. “I thought she was only joking about the fair — but I guess if she knows her own mind, I can know mine!” Determination to turn the tables on Thurley and the town surged to the front. “It's nobody's business whether I marry you to-morrow — I'm going right on with the plans for the house and the ring — and all of it! I guess we can learn to be happy in our own way,” he touched her hair gently. “You're an awful good little girl to care enough not to be jealous of Thurley. I don't think you'll ever be sorry we married . . . sometimes it takes a funny sort of thing — like my being engaged to Thurley, you know,” he stumbled over the situation in poorly chosen words, “and her wanting a career and leaving me, to make other people happy!” He tried to laugh, lovable, broken-hearted boy, and Lorraine tried to laugh, too, lovable girl whose broken heart was beginning to mend. “And here I am marrying the same little girl I played with — so here's our pledge to be happy — no matter what.”

To Lorraine's father, who questioned the sudden

THE GRAY ANGELS

courtship, he said with Birge aggression, "Lorraine loves me and she'll never marry any other fellow. I guess you know all there is to my being engaged to Thurley, sir. I'm sorry it ever got into the paper, but that's done and there is no taking it back. I loved Thurley, but I'd be a fool to mope my life away like Miss Clergy did because a girl wanted to sing instead of be my wife. After all, it's not a matter of life and death." He wondered if the Reverend McDowell knew how loud his heart was thumping, great irregular thumps, each one trying to say in its dumb fashion, "Oh, Thurley-dear!" But he finished bravely, "I'm making plans to build and I guess you know I'll take good care of 'Raine. If you've any other objection to me, I'd like to hear it."

"Nothing but the haste, my lad," the older man said slowly. "My child would never marry another man — but yourself — this 'heart on the rebound' —"

"I want 'Raine!" Dan cried, striking the chair arm with the flat of his palm. "And I'm going to marry her. I'll wait until the house is built, if you think it best, but she's promised to marry me and she won't change."

"Then why bother me at all?" Lorraine's father could not refrain from saying. "It was never a Birge habit, as I recall it."

After Dan left the parsonage study to tell Lorraine her father approved, but they would wait until Fairview was ready for occupancy, and diligently measured her ring finger, finding it two sizes smaller than Thurley's, he left her, dazed with joy yet trying to still the something which whispered,

"He loves Thurley; you must always be content with crumbs."

Lorraine began counting over the things in the long-

THE GRAY ANGELS

closed hope chest and planning to crowd it to overflowing. What mattered it, if they were not married for a year or two? Was she not "bespoken" to Dan Birge? And Lorraine was quite positive she would not change her mind.

Upon leaving Lorraine that day, Dan went to the box-car wagon to sit for a long time on its steps, thinking the bitter, rebellious things of youth, that dangerous noon-time, trying to forget the glorious moment when he had measured Thurley's ring finger with a blade of grass she had plucked near Philena's grave, how every bit of him thrilled with a new, savage joy and new, savage longings . . . well, it was to be Lorraine! He flipped the bit of ribbon she had used as a ring guide on the end of his thumb in disdain. After all, it must hurt Thurley a very little when she should hear the news, and, like most of the world, when they cannot have their way unhampered, to hurt the object of past adoration is quite the natural procedure!

When Birge's Corners exhibited customary signs of fall, with winter clothes hung out to be beaten, smells of catsup and corn relish, the broken panes in the opera house windows repaired and the poster of a gaudy burlesque queen pasted on the billboard, a full line of mufflers and overcoats crowding the emporium show cases, bonfires of leaves and misty haze veiling the early mornings, Thurley Precore and Abby Clergy, two islands of old-fashionedness, entirely surrounded by seas of new fashion, safely ensconced in a comfortable hotel suite, were chatting like schoolgirls over the momentous event of the morrow.

For Thurley was to meet the Napoleon of grand opera, the master critic and coach, who could make or mar the most talented person in creation — Bliss Hobart, a

THE GRAY ANGELS

mysterious, powerful, never-erring judge of one's abilities, both latent and developed.

Miss Clergy's solicitors and Miss Clergy's checkbook skilfully deciphered false lures of singing teachers and alleged powerful agents, and had, at the same time, discovered the nucleus of the New York art world. So Thurley was to make her bow, as it were, to the very public itself at noon to-morrow.

CHAPTER IX

Bliss Hobart was impossible to describe, Thurley concluded. As she first spied him behind his carved teak-wood desk, one of a hundred luxuries in his elaborate studio, he appeared a small, insignificant person with an overlarge head betraying the aristocracy of an old race and piercing gray eyes. His hair, a salt and pepper affair with a wild front-lock waving as signal for a controversy, showed the result of a fever, not age, she afterwards learned, and his long, almost grotesque nose and flexible mouth with its deeply-dimpled chin inspired her with a desire to laugh. But as he came across the room to greet Miss Clergy and give Thurley a cheerful nod, she saw that he was as tall as her own self and his shoulders were broad and powerful, while his wonderfully shaped hands championed his abilities. He was dressed more foppishly than she had ever seen a man dress — a blue serge with a corded white waistcoat, an exquisite sapphire pin in the cream satin scarf and a watch chain as slender as a woman's. As he whisked out his handkerchief characteristically, she discovered it to be of more cobwebby texture than her own.

Facing him, her blue eyes staring in naïve wonderment, Thurley asked herself why she had experienced the illusion of this man's being a clever dwarf with cruel, calculating eyes! Whatever Bliss Hobart thought of Thurley would have been impossible to state. He seemed more interested in Miss Clergy whose thin face was flushed

THE GRAY ANGELS

with excitement and whose small self wore a sheathlike dress of black silk, which suited her well.

For the moment Bliss Hobart seemed a respectful footman solicitous about his mistress' comfort, as he "fussed" over selecting a chair for Miss Clergy and asked as to draughts. Thurley was left in confusion in the middle of the great room, looking out at Central Park.

She tried to steady her thoughts by taking inventory of the room's contents, but it added to her bewilderment. There was something of every period in furnishings — shrug-shouldered French, the burly Jacobean, the Victorian redolent of posies, curls and lace mitts, subtle Oriental and convenient Mission — there was rare glass which had successfully imprisoned Italian sunshine, Holland delftware, cloisonne, snowy linen panels from China encrusted with gold dragons, lamps with the magic of India and great jars of Navajo pottery. Behind the desk was a door halfway ajar — Thurley caught her breath as she looked at it. This must be the sacred spot where one was "tried out." The agent finally arranging the interview had told them that when Bliss Hobart was convinced he had a find, he went into the little anteroom and played accompaniments or scales or whatever he wished, while he tested voices. But before he heard one sing, he had a way of deciding whether or not it was worth while to pass through the anteroom door.

Thurley wondered if she could make any sound at all — her voice seemed frozen. Supposing she did not meet Miss Clergy's expectations? Supposing she were forced to return to Birge's Corners or to stay in New York as a ribbon clerk, sharing another ribbon clerk's hall bedroom? She began looking at the collection of autographed photographs which lined the

THE GRAY ANGELS

walls, the marble statues, the bas reliefs, some paintings of an interesting, delicate sort in pastels and shadowy outlines which hung close beside the teakwood desk. Then the portrait of a striking, but not beautiful, woman claimed Thurley's attention. The woman had a clever, quick face with flashing black eyes, almost as black as Dan's, and blueblack hair, quite like Dan's, combed into a huge knot at the nape of her thin, yet attractive, neck. She wore a Grecian frock — two layers of white voile and a layer of black with a jet cord for a girdle. It was a merciless frock, Thurley decided, for it showed the woman's bony, frail figure and unlovely, long arms with wonderfully *live* hands and surprisingly stubby fingers. On the third finger of each hand was an antique ring, the glow of the jewels shining on the white lap of her frock. Something about the picture fascinated Thurley. She was wondering if this woman were not Bliss Hobart's wife; if she did not find it a stupendous task to be as clever and as keen as her husband. Yet those well-modeled scarlet lips and the rather masculine chin told Thurley that the woman was equal to almost any task. By contrast, glancing in a side mirror, Thurley felt herself overdone and impossible. She longed to exit silently and drop down the nearest elevator shaft in peaceful oblivion.

Before she had reached the studio she had felt sure of herself, scornful of criticism. Miss Clergy told her she looked a picture in her frock of white crêpe, embroidered with dull red, and a smart crimson sailor to match. But as she pulled off her gloves in nervousness she felt unfit, impossible, one mammoth gaucherie — her wilful brown hair would creep out in untidy strands and her face grow flushed in spite of the conventional coating of powder. She wondered what Dan Birge would say if he came into

THE GRAY ANGELS

the studio of the "wisest and most cynical man in New York's art world" and saw her!

"Ah," Hobart was saying, "we can go inside now —"

Thurley started. Miss Clergy was sitting in blissful rapture in an easy chair by the window, her gray head nodding at Thurley in delight.

Thurley wondered how long she had been standing spellbound. She had thought and felt so many strange things and emotions that the time she was sure must be great.

"I won't keep you out here," Hobart was saying, just the suggestion of a blur in his pleasant voice. "Some one might stray in, and I've an appointment for lunch. Miss Clergy, please help yourself to something to read."

"I sha'n't be lonesome," Miss Clergy answered. They were a strange pair, this wild-rose girl and the little ghost-lady who had quickened just in time to make the wild rose become hothouse variety.

"What were you looking at so intently?" Hobart paused before they went ahead.

"That picture of your wife," Thurley answered without delay.

He laughed. "Dear me, that is a very famous person who is an intimate friend of mine and a friend of my other intimate friends. Her name is Ernestine Christian and she is a pianist. Paderewski thinks no one plays Beethoven as well as Ernestine — you may meet her some day. But remember that in New York the portraits of ladies hanging nearest gentlemen's desks are never likely to be their wives. Tell me, what do you think of the painting?"

"That it was by the same artist who did those." Thurley pointed childishly.

"Right — Collin Hedley — you've heard of him?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

She shook her head. "We live at Birge's Corners," she said demurely.

"Then you will hear of him, particularly if you meet Miss Christian. Collin painted her portrait as a revenge, because she insisted that men with Van Dyke beards always have a queer sense of humor. I take it you understand who boasts of a Van Dyke beard. Then they gave me the picture because I am so fond of them both." He was leading the way across the room.

As she stepped inside the anteroom, Hobart closed the door. Looking about she saw tawny, rough plaster walls, highly polished floors, a white marble mantel seemingly unconscious of the fire of birch logs ready to be kindled. Gold-colored curtains shut out daylight; peasant chairs with rush seats and a great, dark-wooded settle piled with cushions gave the proper background for the piano which stood in the center of the room.

"Sit down," Hobart said pleasantly. "I was so interested in your fairy godmother that I have not had a good look at you. There — so — I can see your eyes. How old are you?" His voice changed to that of an impersonal and rather impatient stranger's.

"A little past twenty. Does it matter how old a person is?"

"Find that out for yourself! Sometimes — sometimes not. Now tell me, where were you born and educated and are you engaged to half a dozen lads in Birge's Backyard or wherever it is? And why do you want to be an opera singer, and what has led you to fancy you could be? Is it because Miss Clergy has advanced you money? Before you answer, let me add that money does not keep you in grand opera or any other art work. I'm not saying that occasionally it does not get you in, although not as often as envious laymen like to imagine. But it can-

THE GRAY ANGELS

not keep you on the stage or in the hearts of the people unless you merit the so doing. You must use your brain, as well as sing. You may have the voice of angels and yet fail on the operatic or dramatic stage. You may have the angelic voice and heavenly beauty and celestial gowns — and still be registered as zero, unless you use your brain. You must employ intellect, wit, sincerity, industry, the same as if you were building a house or cooking a meal or raising a family. A mediocre singer with brains can always surpass naturally endowed, but mentally sluggish, singers. Remember that!" He leaned back in his chair and his gray eyes narrowed somewhat; the dimples in his chin vanished and with them the good-natured, kindly expression.

As if she were pleading with a judge, Thurley, who all in an instant swept from her savage little self everything she had fancied she believed, found herself beginning with admirable logic,

"I was born in Thurley, Idaho, so they named me Thurley. Just think — if I hadn't been born until the next day, it would have been Hoskins, Idaho! So far luck was with me!"

Half an hour later she ended with, "I shall never go back to the Corners, and I shall pay Miss Clergy for all she is doing, no matter if she has no need of the money. And I shall never marry any one! You see that was my one promise to Miss Clergy. At least not for twenty years, she said, because by that time she would be dead and could haunt me if I went to behaving foolishly."

Hobart smiled at her as genially as he had smiled at Miss Clergy, remarking, "Ah, the *de luxe* Topsy, I take it! I much prefer a Topsy prospect to a Little Eva prospect with a myriad of interested relations who feel certain I cannot comprehend the wonderful way their Little Eva

THE GRAY ANGELS

sings 'Madame Butterfly,' proving it with clippings from the music column of the *Standing Stone Gazette!* After all, no one is really interested in *you*. I take it Miss Clergy is keen on seeing you cheat a man of love; isn't that it?"

"Yes," loneliness swept over Thurley for the instant, "I don't suppose any one really cares about me, because the people who did care I ran away and left." She caught her underlip quickly.

"Then the decks are cleared for action," Hobart said with relief. "Before you sing to-day, let me add that the greatest lesson to learn in order to be a genius, no matter in what capacity, is to be impersonal. Talent is *personal*. That is why you have so excellent a foundation."

"Always impersonal?"

He shrugged his shoulders, impatient of the interruption. "We can't tell when I haven't even heard you sing. My dear child, were I to map out destinies for every one who comes to me, I should be quite mad. As it is, to be the 'final judgment' takes the disposition of a dove and the constitution of a lion. You'll see what I mean later on. You have had so little education in one way that it will be hard for you to catch up. You'll have to work without ceasing. But you don't look like a shirker."

"I'm not," she said, hating herself for the flat remark.

"There are two kinds of persons in this world," he mused, rising and going over to the piano, "those who wait for a dead man's shoes and those keen enough to employ their own bootmaker. I never hear any one sing unless I judge them to be of the last class and so," sitting down and magically running his fingers over the keys, "tell me — what can you sing?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I love the rôle of *Marguerite*," she began innocently.

He paused to chuckle. "Bravo! There never was a really normal soprano who did not aspire to *Marguerite* for her début. It is as much a soprano symptom, as it is a tenor symptom to yearn to do sacred arias on Easter Sunday and a basso to growl to be heard at open air music festivals. The only rhythmic thing about contraltos is their delight in having cigars named after them." He looked up to see if she was laughing at his nonsense.

"But why?" she demanded seriously.

"Well, why are brides fond of trying scalloped potatoes in new silver pudding dishes? Why do young widows join bridge clubs or why does a boy cherish his first teeth to trade in at school for king-chestnuts?" He picked out a flippant little chord as punctuation.

"You must not call me too stupid," Thurley said unexpectedly, leaning her arms on the piano, "but my original sense of humor — the one I was born with — had to be put in cold storage when I settled down at Birge's Corners and began to borrow the minister's library in sections. They just could not have understood it. But I do believe it is reviving."

"A sense of humor is the most precious thing in the world," Hobart told her. "It ranks with a sense of honor. And if you had to repress it, I am glad you merely put it in cold storage. Sing this scale, please," he added, rapidly striking the notes.

Thurley sang it; then another and some exercises which she thought difficult and felt proud of having done so easily. They were exercises the city organist had half-way taught her and which she had practised diligently by means of Betsey Pilrig's parlor organ.

"Some more — lightly, quickly — no, no, you're hiss-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ing — try mi — mi-mi — so.” Again she followed the notes cleverly — so she thought.

Hobart interrupted with a discord. “You naturally breathe well, but you are frightened. You are not singing but faking, and trying to make me think you are not. My dear young person, if I were not able to tell in half a second who is really singing and who is not, I would be forced to abdicate instanter. Now either go home and rest up and take off that company manner and then come back here and sing or admit you cannot sing or else — sing!” He rested his hands on the keys again.

“I can sing,” Thurley said almost sullenly. “I gave up marrying the man I love in order to sing.”

“Good plot! I’ll tell it to Caleb Patmore, the novelist, but my line is not writing. Because you have done this so-called heroic feat, do not fancy you can become a grand opera singer as a reward, any more than the school-girl’s fancy is true that nuns are broken-hearted young women taking poetic refuge in the veil. You are so young and fearless that you remind me of a nice, willing but as yet impossible puppy dog who needs to be shown his place in life. You do not understand that if you have been given a voice and the will and brains to train it and the soul of a true artist to preside over all,” his voice was earnest, “what a gigantic task you are taking upon yourself. No one has said it better than Tolstoy and Aylmer Maude. The former tells us, ‘The task of art is enormous, art should cause violence to be set aside . . . art is not a pleasure, a solace nor an amusement, it is a great matter, art is an organ of human life transmitting man’s reasonable perceptions into feeling.’ And Maude has, to my mind, finished the situation by saying that ‘the one great quality which makes a work of art truly contagious is its sincerity.’ *Voila!*” he began strumming bass notes.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I must write those things down," Thurley whispered.
"I must learn them —"

"Why?"

"They're so — so — what is it? Help me out! Remember I'm from Birge's Corners, I've such lots of things to learn and I'm really quite afraid of you!" She leaned nearer him. "I'll have to study languages and history and no end of stuff and have hours a day of music and love no one and be impersonal, until I am able to have the same *look* that Ernestine Christian has — she has learned to be impersonal! I want to cease to be a country girl with a good voice and be an individual. Please, Mr. Hobart, let me sing *Marguerite* for you! I'm not half so afraid of that as I am of scales —"

He began the music, and, looking away from him at the rough, plaster walls, Thurley peopled them with a sea of faces, as she had done hundreds of times in Betsey Pilrig's parlor or at the little cemetery while she was waiting for Dan. She wondered if Miss Clergy heard her sing and if there would come a chilling burst of criticism from this man. She felt that, if this were so, she would turn on him in unexplainable defense of her voice, ignorant as she was of the things still to be achieved.

Hobart rose from the piano and came to put his firm hands on her shoulders. "Genius has as many symptoms as measles," he said abruptly. "I'm afraid you've every last one of them!"

"You mean," she said, tense as an unsprung trap, "that it is going to be worth while?" Things were black and queerly shaped to her eyes, due to annoying tears. She thought Hobart's face a dozen cynical, smiling faces peeping at her from all sides. "Is it worth while, if I work very, very hard?"

"Thurley (almost Hoskins) Precore," it was as if he

THE GRAY ANGELS

pronounced a decree, "for us to stand here and exchange the compliments and promises and superlative statements we are both thinking would be as annoying as women haggling over which shall pay the cabfare! We could drag all manner of red herring over the course and merely waste smart sentences which are in demand for after-dinner speeches. But if you work as I tell you and do not become personal either in your relationship with me or your other musical associates — it isn't as hard-hearted as it sounds — and if this presuming young rustic from Birge's Backyard stays in the offing — well — you'll make your début in about a year!"

Thurley did not answer.

"If you are going to faint," he continued nonchalantly, "the settle is well-cushioned and handy. I had to have one put in here, for they would go down in absurd little lumps all about the room — sometimes with joy, more often rage! I see you are not going to faint, so please sing something else — something to show up the bad spots. *Marguerite* is rather full of deceptive curlycues — ah, I know — hymns — yes, real old-time gospel hymns! Then we'll do more exercises, because fright has taken wings."

He played half a dozen hymns, all of which she sang without hesitation, laughing down at him between stanzas. She could not understand her attitude towards this baffling, fearsome person, young-old or old-young whichever he might prove to be. She found herself wondering if she would ever meet Ernestine Christian and Collin Hedley and Caleb Patmore, or if being impersonal was to exclude them as well as Hobart. . . .

"Good, good," he said, turning from the piano and hugging up his knees. "Well, we'll have to get to work as fast as ever we can. I believe in 'muscular art,' the

THE GRAY ANGELS

same as some one else has said of 'muscular Christianity' — a sound mind in a sound body is the best foundation for lasting success. Success is the sincerity with which you do your work and the good your work does some one else — remember that when ennui bursts in an unwelcome guest and you begin to ape some of the near-great who hover about. Art is the expression of a man's joy in his work and you've everything about and in you, as well as before you, to prove to the world the truth of that saying. Many new and confusing things will happen shortly. All sorts and conditions of people, attentions, praise, blame, drudgery, ease, dissipations, monotonous routine — heavens, child, it makes my head ache to think of an absolutely *de luxe* Topsy from Birge's Backyard with the voice of an announcing angel set down in New York and told to prepare herself for grand opera!"

He patted her on the shoulder. "Don't look startled, Thurley — I'll have to call you Thurley because Precore sticks in my throat — you'll weather through and some time — I'll tell you a pet scheme of mine that perhaps —" He actually was confused as if he regretted the remark. "But for now, I'll start you off with having you report here every day at eleven and again at three — and you're to do all the other things I tell you. Well, did you think I would order you to Italy first to get mellow, fall in love with one of those damned Italian officers with a heliotrope-lined coat and then come back and let me teach you to sing? God taught you to sing before you came to earth, and you've remembered His teaching. . . . Just learn the things we men are fools enough to think we must know and you have won!"

He closed the pianoforte and opened the door.

"No more exercises?" Thurley was tingling with excitement.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You're all nerves! Do you think I need more exercises to make me quite sure about you — the same as an apron never fails to convince a man of the wearer's domesticity? To-morrow we begin to polish and prune. Go home and lie down and think about the frivolous things in the world. You'll be set to work fast enough . . . ah, Miss Clergy, and did you hear us?"

"I heard Thurley sing," Miss Clergy said abruptly. "Well — well?"

Thurley answered by stooping down and clasping the ghost lady in her arms. "He says it is worth your while," she whispered.

"Then it has been worth everything," Miss Clergy answered, more to herself than to Thurley.

Hobart's secretary came in with some announcement cards and Hobart paused before he read them to say good-by.

"To-morrow at eleven, and Baxter will see you this afternoon about other teachers. Good-by, Miss Clergy, and, Thurley, happy days!"

He was so kindly again and with the suggestion of a schoolboy pal that Thurley could not resist the asking, "Oh, do you find many people worth all your trouble?"

Hobart's eyes crinkled with amusement. "To quote a most reliable authority, the pushcart man, 'What I make on the peanut, I lose on the banan!'"

As they passed out the door, Thurley heard a woman's voice saying, "Tell him Lissa Dagmar has come to say good-by. He won't keep me waiting. I'm sailing this afternoon." There was both a snarl and a purr in the voice, and Thurley wondered if Lissa Dagmar had proved "peanut or banan."

CHAPTER X

If Miss Clergy and Thurley were mysteries to the hotel guests and attendants, so were the guests and attendants mysteries untold to Thurley and Miss Clergy. To be placed suddenly in New York with unlimited leeway in opportunities and money, cut off from every simple, human tie which heretofore had impressed itself on one's emotional heart and be put to work at such a multitude of things that one could hardly remember which hour was designated for this and which for that — to say the very least, it was "tizzy," as Hobart obligingly expressed it for Thurley during one of their lessons.

No less "tizzy" was it for Miss Clergy to waken from a selfish lethargy, with revenge the stimulating impulse; to try, all in an instant, to find her way back to the proper method of living combined with modern requirements and readjustments; to become accustomed to strange noises, vehicles, buildings, all manner of new and bewildering novelties which every one else, save her wild-rose Thurley, accepted as commonplace; to refrain from telling every one who talked with her the reason she had taken this homeless country girl to New York and was prepared to spend a fortune to make her a success.

The modistes and milliners used to gossip about it, after they had been in Miss Clergy's rooms to take measurements and orders. So did the bootmaker Hobart had sent up, and the riding master and the language teacher and the social secretary, who somehow slipped into her place and became one of them. A veritable monument

THE GRAY ANGELS

to fashion and smartness she was, with the way of making one sit up straight when one was least expecting the command, of smoothing out personal pronouns to the ease of every one concerned, who found time every day to make Thurley practise entering and leaving a room, bowing, shaking hands, smiling, laughing, holding her head just so, who had stacks of hateful cards and sheets of paper on which Thurley must write invitations to imaginary dinners and affairs and then reply to the invitations, who told one that the easiest way to carry on a conversation was to be an excellent listener, and yet, all in the same breath, made one memorize certain smart phrases or witty bon mots, historical dates of importance, soothing sentences which would fit in for the weather, a clay pigeon match or the assassination of the president — all these things and more did the social secretary achieve, Thurley groaning inwardly as the hour approached for her arrival.

Yet she stumbled through her lessons without bringing down too many frowns on her young shoulders, and when she sat at the improvised dinner table with a startling array of crystal glasses, goblets and small silver, and was requested to demonstrate the use of each, the social secretary nodded approval in a short time and said one day in that well-bred, monotonous voice,

“You’re so shockingly bright, Miss Precore, I’m sure there’s a scandal in the family somewhere,” laughing outright at Thurley’s embarrassment.

“Have you really had people more stupid than I?” she demanded.

“Dear, yes! My last two pupils were twins, Golda and Silva Muggins from New Mexico. It would take a regiment to count their fortunes — but their manners!” She shrugged her trim shoulders. “And yet they both

THE GRAY ANGELS

are engaged and doing nicely — I'm to finish buying the trousseaux to-morrow."

"What frightful work to teach —" Thurley began. At which the social secretary fled lest Thurley entangle her in a really human vein of conversation and endanger her poise.

Following these lessons Miss Clergy would have Thurley come into her room and have her repeat all she had learned, after which Thurley would manage to escape to her own bedroom to burst into rebellious, beautiful song. For singing at the present time seemed to be of the least importance of all the things she did!

A gymnast came each morning before breakfast and made her exercise and do folk dances, all manner of antics strange and, to her mind, ludicrous. There was a beauty doctor who did her nails and took charge of her hair and skin, showing her which colors were becoming and which were not and the test for any woman in doubt as to the proper shade to wear — to lay a strip of the proposed goods across the hair, not the throat or cheek, as women fondly delude themselves — and see if the light and effect are to be desired.

"How many teachers does one great big girl need, Aunt Abby?" Thurley said, six weeks after Hobart had told her the little story of the peanut and the banana. "How do they think one brain can remember everything? How do you know Mr. Hobart isn't going to be disappointed after all? He has never said a word about my voice since that first day, just scales and horrid nasal exercises and that grimy little Bohemian man to take me in tow half the time. . . . I'm dead tired, that's the truth —" She flung herself down in characteristic fashion beside Miss Clergy. She wanted some one to ruffle up her hair affectionately or whisper there would be a

THE GRAY ANGELS

chestnut party that afternoon near Wood's Hollow. And here the memory of Dan Birge would steal in, an unwelcome yet paramount personage, so she jumped up and ran over to the window.

"You can't disappoint me," Miss Clergy protested. "Mr. Hobart has said you wouldn't."

"Really?" Her face flushed. "Why, he's never mentioned it —"

"It's a secret," Miss Clergy added childishly. "Don't give me away. Most girls have to study for years and go abroad, but Mr. Hobart wants to prove that an American trained girl can be as great a prima donna as one who enters the stage by way of Vienna or Paris. Come back, Thurley, I want to tell you something." She held out her arms as stiltedly as a marionette.

Thurley obeyed.

"I want you to be happy because you will be both rich and famous. Isn't that enough?" Her bright eyes peered into Thurley's face.

"You mean because I'll keep my vow to you about not marrying — and I ought to be satisfied to have the other things?"

"Maybe so. I'm a queer old woman and I choose to live the rest of my queer old life as I please. But I saved you from the terrible, but common fate — marrying a small-town bully and being a faded drudge. We'll leave that for the minister's daughter."

"But Dan would never marry Lorraine — why —" Thurley paused. She was remembering the day Lorraine had brought her the embroidered set. How very sweet was Betsey Pilrig's garden, far sweeter than the imported scent they had her use! How lovely and peaceful were the green fields which stretched as far as eye could see . . . not tall, dirty buildings with myriads of shaded win-

THE GRAY ANGELS

dows, each concealing some human being with woes and longings greater than her own! How lovely was the old box-car, the first home the girl had known! She had worn pink linen that day Lorraine came! She had paid for it by extra lessons given in South Wales, and Dan had sent her the sash for a surprise. How simple but how sane it all had been! She glanced at her blue velvet frock trimmed with moleskin—"so ultra," they murmured when they fitted it. Perhaps this was the better way.

Miss Clergy caught the drift of her thoughts and the withered hand closed firmly over Thurley's. "If he did marry her, you'd be glad to dance at the wedding, wouldn't you?" she insisted.

The actress in Thurley rescued her so that she could say, "Of course, that's all left behind. No use being like a story-book girl unless you have a s-story-book heart. Now it's time for Mr. Hobart's lesson, *mia*, so I'm off. I wish you'd let me walk sometimes or take a subway! I'm tired of being whirled away in taxis! Why, I haven't even had a moment alone at Grant's Tomb," laughing in spite of herself.

Miss Clergy smiled. "I'm so proud of you!" she declared. "If I had only found you years ago—"

"I tried to find you," Thurley reminded.

"Ah, but you didn't sing that day! If you had, everything would have changed for us both. When you sing, Thurley, the world is yours—"

Thurley was at the mirror fitting on a high black hat with a bunch of old-blue plumes. "Do you think any one would love me, if I could not sing?" she demanded impetuously.

Miss Clergy became confused. "Dear me, Thurley, I cannot think of you as separate from your voice. There

THE GRAY ANGELS

would be no Thurley if there were no Thurley voice."

Thurley trilled a scale or so. She was thinking of a black-haired lad who had said many's the time, "Hang your voice, Thurley! It's you I love — just you!" Pink linen and old-fashioned parlor organs did have compensations.

"When you come back, we'll plan about our real home," Miss Clergy added. "My lawyers try to impress on me what a neglectful person I've been. They want me to mend my ways and spend my money — not be a sort of Hetty Green always travelling about with a little satchel of securities!" Miss Clergy's sense of humor was reviving with the rest.

"Our real home — besides the Fincherie? You'll never give that up?"

Miss Clergy frowned. "Not the Fincherie! I mean here in New York. We can't go on living in a hotel. It is too common, too parvenu. I want the right sort of home for you, the sort that your ability will deserve."

Thurley was in the doorway. "I beg you will do nothing of the sort," she said. "You have loaded me now with the treasures of Arabia. I beg you will not! I want to earn things myself — as I did at the Corners — you must let me. Being supported takes something out of me, I don't know what," she clasped her hands in her rapt fashion. "I'd rather live in a tiny room, or a box car, you know, and have very skimpy meals and old-style clothes and study hard and forget the meals and clothes and then earn the beautiful, lovely things. That would make me feel right, 'way inside."

Miss Clergy's withered face lost some of its haunted expression. "Well, my dear, you shall wait then and earn your home, but I am afraid that, if it is quite your

THE GRAY ANGELS

own home, you will not want to share it with a funny old per —”

At which Thurley flew across the room and put her fresh cheek against the faded one to promise with the enthusiasm of untried youth that the home she should earn would be but half her home, for the other half would belong to a certain dear person.

Whirling towards the studio, Thurley drew Betsey Pilrig's letter from her bag. It was the second letter she had had from the Corners, for Betsey Pilrig undertook writing a letter with the same solemn preparation that most people give to making a will. It required several days of deciding “what to say to her” and a battle against natural inertia before she could sit at the red-covered dining-table and force her toil-worn fingers to write in cramped characters unreal-sounding phrases. Besides, Betsey Pilrig had always sealed letters with the firm conviction that maybe they would never get there anyway, letters seemed such queer things to go flying about the country.

Not that Betsey had not thought of Thurley every hour in the day, standing in the doorway of her house and of the Fincherie to picture again the blue-eyed young goddess dancing imperiously up the walk or sitting under gnarled apple trees to shell peas or peel potatoes, singing in glorious tones as she did so.

When Thurley's letters had come to Betsey, she and Hopeful read them aloud to Ali Baba and the trio sat discussing the fate of their songbird. To their minds the “happening” was still something to be talked of with suspicion. One does not fancy a “ghost” taking a beloved child to the city, never to return, and being responsible, so it had become known, for Dan Birge's broken heart and his mad engagement to Lorraine.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"She'll never come back the same," Ali Baba would insist.

"Abby Clergy will leave her every nickel," Hopeful would supplement. "Then she's bound to come back and lord it over Dan Birge."

"She'll be a great singer — God love and keep her," was Betsey's plea.

As Thurley broke the seal on the letter, she felt as if she wanted to drive to the station willy-nilly to take the first train to the Corners, to come into the emporium and, upon seeing Dan, say that she was "sorry" and she still wanted him to plan for the new house . . . but she was on her way to Bliss Hobart's studio, envied of the envied, dressed as a "princess," with strange wisdom concerning many things making inroads into her simple heart.

She read the letter hastily:

Dear Thurley:

I don't know how to tell you but you ought to know that Dan and Lorraine are engaged and every one knows Dan don't care two straws for Lorraine, poor girl, but she is dead in love with him. He done it for spite and I guess they will both be sorry. Unless he leaves town he can't get out of marrying her because her father is the minister. He looks haunted like and my heart aches for him and for her. Dear Thurley, you will not mind, you are in such a big city with so many things to see and do and all the lovely clothes you say you have and your teachers and all the rest. Sometimes it seems a dream to me.

Will you ever come back to us, Thurley, tell me if you go to church and have they asked you to sing in meeting? How is Miss Clergy, does she ever talk about that Eyetalian fellow?

We are well and Hopeful and me get along so well in this house except that it seems pretty big and that it ain't right to take charity. Ali Baba misses you, he says he will send a box of apples when he gets the ones he wants for you. Thank you for the dress and

THE GRAY ANGELS

coat, they are too fine for my old self. God bless Thurley Precore,
from,
yours respectfully,
B. Pilrig.

The driver was opening the door for Thurley to leave the cab. After a moment she handed him a bill, threading her way through the crowd until she reached the studio building. She wondered if Hobart would notice her manner and comment on it; if she could manage to get through her lesson without breaking down. Dan and Lorraine engaged — with her ring — and it would be Lorraine's house with the sun parlor that Thurley once planned and the big living room (right across the front of the house, Danny boy, and a fireplace big enough for two Santa Clauses); Lorraine would revel in the garden pergola and plan the sun dial — oh, it hurt, *it hurt* — she was a miserable, jealous coward!

How dared Lorraine take her Dan, pale-faced, scheming little creature willing to be a doormat for some one who did not love her! As Thurley entered the elevator, the thought stimulated her in dangerous fashion. . . . Even yet, if she were to return to Birge's Corners and say to Dan, "I am sorry — love me, darling," he would fling discretion and Lorraine to the winds and all would be as it once had been. . . . Well, she might do it . . . after she was famous . . . it would have twice the sting and double the triumph. . . . He would have had time to regret. . . . She did not love Dan as dearly as she loved love itself, he being the ardent agent of the great force. She wondered if she could love fame as much. She had a flash of realization of what a broken heart such as Miss Clergy's must have been. Miss Clergy had no talent. Love had been her all.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Hobart was playing a new song as she came into the room. He did not pause to greet her but said, after a moment, looking into a mirror over the piano in which he could see her quite distinctly, "What is wrong? Only a tight slipper? Take off that ridiculous bonnet and come here! I want you to try this —" It was such a jarring contrast, with that wonderful element of sustained and hidden force which such men as Hobart need in order to conquer genius, that Thurley felt the past, of Birge's Corners and its petty woes and happenings, fade as if some one had painted it out with a mighty brush.

She came to stand beside him, while he taught her the song, making no comment when she finished but turning to a book of prosaic scales.

"Please answer some questions," Thurley demanded, putting her hand on his arm.

"This is lesson time!" He adjusted a pair of reading glasses critically.

"Let me miss a lesson. I never see you other times and I've the right to ask questions."

With an amused smile he flipped at the keys. "Shoot away," he sighed.

"What do you think of me?" she began promptly.

"I never tell women what I think of them. Please let's get to work."

"Tell me this — am I a real genius?" unconscious of the implied egotism.

"Of course," he answered simply. "Would I bother so much with you if you were not? Would I send a regiment of teachers and coaches to get you into proper form? But enough of that! Only don't let it spoil you. Still I don't think it will, because you've the sort of talent that is rock-bottom foundation. You're going to

THE GRAY ANGELS

be immeasurably silly and have all kinds of notions and adventures. I'm not interested in that part of your career. I want you to be clear on this point." As he spoke, he seemed aloof, absolutely impersonal and removed from workaday affairs, and Thurley experienced the sensation of embarrassment at having asked him any questions.

"Your voice is my hobby just now." The enthusiasm of youth was in his own. "It is God-given, art concealing art. You have that fire, dash, *touch of strangeness* that one sees very seldom. You really would have hard work to spoil your voice, Thurley. Moreover, I would have hard work to teach you how to sing. Are you surprised? Oh, you thought as do so many that I would teach you to sing as one learns to dance or paint on china, some systematic, mechanical accomplishment . . . all wrong!" He brushed the entire range of keys with his hands as if to express denial of the fact. "God taught you to sing, Thurley. You sang as well in your Birge's Corners as you will sing in opera — and perhaps better. But you need polish, general education along many lines, endless drill and routine. As for singing, *per se*, there is nothing I can teach or tell you. I can direct and restrain — that is my part. So it is with all great artists, the gift is quite complete and quite their own; it is for them to be willing to be directed and not to shirk drudgery." He was about to add something else, something which it seemed to Thurley was a secret of his very heart, but he broke off abruptly with,

"Now, you young country scamp, sing hey and sing ho, for you're wasting time!" So taking her cue, Thurley fell to work with a zest.

The lesson ended with a surprise.

"Try this aria of Rosina's in 'Barber of Seville'—

THE GRAY ANGELS

the '*Una voce poco fa.*' I've a notion you can make it celestial harmony if you like. If you can't do the Italian, take a syllable and stick to it. Now —" Handing her the music he dashed into the aria in contagious spirit.

"Very bad," he commented, making a wry face and taking the music from her, "but that's nothing against the voice. A year from now we shall have the music critics sitting up and exclaiming. Run along, Thurley, and don't let the rustic swains make you lose time from your lessons."

She was putting on her hat and fancied he could not see her expression. But he surprised her with,

"You will have all the time in the world for nonsense after you've mastered the things you need to know. What you want to do is to put your heart in cold storage for a while, as you did your sense of humor. Just be an amiable and obedient genius-flapper and everything else will true up and appear in due season, just as the curtain speeches during the last act reveal the missing will, the lost child and soften the irate parent's heart against the poor but proud hero."

"But I don't want always to have some part of me in cold storage," Thurley protested. "I've always been such — such a very real person that it's hard to —"

"Of course, that's the best part of it. Easy things never get you anywhere. Effective medicine is almost always bitter." He came to put his hands on her shoulders.

"Why, you're not so old," she said bluntly, "are you?"

"Not half so old as I'd like to be; age is so safe, Thurley, when you are dealing in temperament! You can growl much more effectively."

"You mean people fall in love with you?" she asked

THE GRAY ANGELS

spiritedly. "Is that what you shrink from?" Her naïve impertinence was unconscious.

"I cringe! Which is worse than mere shrinking." He gave her a little shake. "You funny, round-cheeked girl, run along. You'll be in opera before we realize it and adopting the airs and graces of an empress. But I shall remember you as the direct, rosy-cheeked young person who demanded if I feared having people love me." His eyes closed briefly and then he whirled her around as if she were a small boy. "Be off! Ah, yes, here's a note — I nearly did forget." He reached in an inner pocket and handed over a cream-colored envelope with a heavy lavender seal.

"From her who you fancied was my wife," he explained, enjoying her confusion. "Ernestine Christian, one of our 'family.' She does not start her season until January, but then she's going to tell you all that. You'll have to drive fast to be on time, for you're to take tea with her at half after four. And don't forget two things: First, you sang the aria in five-and-ten-cent style; and, secondly, you're a nice apple-cheeked kiddie and deserve splendid things!" He waved her out jocularly, and she found herself going through the anterooms reading the note and not speaking to the secretary.

All it said was:

Thurley Precore —

Come take tea with me at half-past four. Bliss says we are to know each other.

Ernestine Christian.

Here at least was a breathing space from lessons. Some one had asked her to tea who would, one would assume, be willing to answer questions. She called a cab and drove to the address.

CHAPTER XI

Thurley had no calling cards — not every detail can be achieved in a magical space of time — so she told the maid to say it was Miss Precore and that she was expected. At which she was shown into the strangest living-room, to her untutored eyes, that she could imagine. It had a black and white tiled floor and green Pompeiian furniture with oddly shaped cushions in still odder places and distinctive mirrors hung on dull, green chains. The piano was in the center of the room and all about the walls were bizarre black and white etchings and some fascinating marines. At the end of the room, the light striking it in excellent manner, was the portrait of a man. As Thurley looked at it, she wondered if she was to go from strange room to stranger room seeing portraits which fascinated her and then meet their originals only to gaze on another portrait equally strange and winsome.

This man was noticeable for his well-shaped head with its short, dark hair and fine, large eyes, hazel she would judge, slightly mocking and lying-in-wait in their expression. They were encased with spectacles of scholarly aspect. He had a womanish chin and the tortured, lined brow of the apostle. Dressed in riding togs, he was sitting on the bench of an old garden, one hand betraying slim, artistic fingers as it rested on the head of a grizzled dog.

Thurley was settling herself in a nearby chair, trying to become accustomed to this very different sort of "scenery," when a woman began saying in a deep, rich voice,

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Poor youngster, tired out, aren't you? Was it scales? How I hated them! Don't worry, I shall not ask you to sing. Put this cushion behind you — ah, here we are."

Thurley stared at her hostess, the same scarlet-lipped, clever-faced woman of the portrait, her blueblack hair combed high to-day and her spatulate hands clasping her knee in boy fashion. She wore no jewelry, but a frock the consonance of copper and silver. It gave the effect of sunset over still water and a silver-coated Persian cat stalked out to settle himself in the fold of her skirt.

"It was very good of you to ask me," Thurley began, feeling rather ill at ease.

"I never ask any one I don't want. So don't feel obligated. Every one says I'm selfishness personified. Bliss says you're to be one of our family and I want to be sort of elder sister — anyway, don't you approve of tea and scandal at the same time?" Her smile softened her face. She reached over to a smoking stand and found a cigarette.

Encouraged, Thurley leaned forward to say, "I'm afraid I don't know about the family. You see I'm quite raw, as they say. And dreadfully confused. I find I have to acquire so many things besides singing exercises."

"I look back fourteen years and see myself as I look at you. I was droll for a year or so. But Bliss claims you have a sense of humor, so everything else will follow like sheep. You don't understand, do you?" she said kindly. "Let's see what the 'family' can do for you. Bliss is such a bear at explaining that he has really turned you over to me. You see, Thurley, there are so many hundreds of the near-famous and so many truly-great persons who abuse the name that a select little coterie of us — myself and five others — after rather depressing and hu-

THE GRAY ANGELS

morous experiences have formed what we call the family, and we are going to adopt you. It's quite a recommendation, but you'll realize it more five years from now. By the way, I shall not ask you to smoke — bad for tender throats."

"How beautiful," Thurley said softly, "a family!"

"Just a title, of course, but we have our parties and our times together and we talk of what we like in the manner we like — rather hard to plunge headlong into the real meaning of things. I think Bliss was precipitate in asking you to the Thursday dinner party."

"He hasn't."

"But he will — that's his way. He's such a busy dear that he never does things properly. Now in the family are myself and Polly Harris, whom you'll know better after seeing than I can tell you. Remember she has a Packard personality in that Lizzie Ford body of hers. Then Collin Hedley —"

"The artist who did your picture?"

"The same. And Mark Wirth, as great a dancer as you will ever see," her lips folded into a displeased expression but she did not explain the reason, "and Bliss and there will be yourself. Then there are Sam Sparling, the English actor, and the original of that portrait," she pointed to the man who had interested Thurley. "His name is Caleb Patmore."

"Why, he writes stories," Thurley said. "Even Birge's Corners has become aware of him."

"Bless his wicked heart!" Ernestine said swiftly.

Thurley began to wonder why Caleb Patmore ever used any other woman as a model for heroines or Collin Hedley for his paintings. Perhaps it was Ernestine's unusual fashion of dress which made every one feel that she had worn only the least beautiful of her gowns or the

THE GRAY ANGELS

careless, homely way she dressed her hair or her unjewelled, ugly hands which could coax from the pianoforte such music as Thurley had never dreamed could exist — or her sarcastic worldliness tempered with a girlish idealism which made her face bright with smiles. Then there was the strange, restless sadness in her eyes and the way the scarlet mouth had of dropping into hurt little curves, symbolic of many things of which Thurley was still ignorant. Ernestine Christian was indifferent, even insolent, regarding her fame, but jealously proud of her theories about it. And when she mentioned Bliss Hobart a few moments later, she said enthusiastically,

“He is such a wonderful idealist, so tremendously sincere and fearless! Most idealists lack the courage to express themselves and they live and die with the world no wiser, but Bliss —! some day, when you, too, have become worldly wise and a bit tired 'way inside, you will understand.”

To which Thurley innocently replied, “Is Caleb Patmore an idealist?”

Ernestine began playing with the fringe of her sash. “Now what do you think?”

Thurley looked at the portrait and then at her hostess. “I don't know,” she evaded.

“Tut-tut, tell me what you think! Never mind what you know.”

“His novels, even though they sell in as small towns as the Corners, are rather — rather —” She floundered piteously.

Ernestine came to the rescue, her scarlet lips curving down in hurt fashion as she answered, “His novels for the most part comprise tattling on blondined art models — and brides! Caleb believes that art must be on a strictly commercial basis and that no art should be endur-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ing, 'any more than a bath,' as he explains, 'but quite as necessary and frequent.' "

"Oh, he is wrong!" Instinctively Thurley was displeased.

"May you always think so, but when the distressingly rich wheeze up in satin-lined cabs and ask you to accompany them to a distressingly vulgar palace and have you sing a song or two at a thousand dollars each; when every one comes salaaming and saluting you, and you, too, begin to have visions of acquiring a vulgar palace all your own and are, therefore, pompous and impossible as so many of us foolish children of light allow ourselves to become; when you look about the salon to select the richest husband or admirer and deliberately neglect your voice for your coiffure and your repertoire for your wardrobe — well, perhaps you may withstand it, but it is a rare happening! Bliss says he has yet to find it otherwise."

"A thousand dollars a song." Thurley recalled that day — how many lifetimes ago — that Dan engaged her to sing at his circus in connection with "the great swinging man" and had emptied his spending-money pocket into her ragged lap. "Oh, no, they only pay a thousand dollars a song in one of Mr. Patmore's novels."

"Mr. Patmore," continued the woman who loved him more dearly than she did herself, "takes his copy from friends, like a bee flitting here and there and returning to the hive honey-laden. We have all accused him of hiding behind screens to gain conversation."

Thurley laughed. "Do they never tip over?"

"They do if we suspect he is behind them," Ernestine replied with a smile.

"What does he do with all his money? He must be very rich if the reports are true. Why even at the Corners we sold a hundred copies of 'Victorious Victoria,'

THE GRAY ANGELS

and it was stupid, even the description of a new way for Victoria to be kissed."

" 'Victorious Victoria' ! It is engraven on my heart. I tried harder to make him burn the manuscript than I did to play well before Queen Mary and King George," she said in a dull voice. " Yet she was ' Victorious Victoria,' for she gave her sponsor a new motor and a lot of foolish jewelry and a Japanese valet and some first editions that he boasted of having wrenched from a millionaire at an auction sale ! You see, Caleb thinks there is no need to sacrifice for one's ideals or to be above a purchase price for mediocre work. He says, ' Writing is a trade. We must all come in on a time clock or be taken to an insane asylum. Give the public what it wants and with their money we can buy what we want. Let the public take the consequent softening of the brain. Younger generations will always be appearing like spring violets and measles to save us authors' and artists' bacon ! ' There is the alpha and omega of his philosophy. One might as well throw oneself against a stone fortress as to make him reason otherwise. Blind, blind as an adder ! " She broke off abruptly to call Thurley's attention to some pottery she had picked up in Dutch Guiana which could not be obtained save as one became a friend of the natives.

Then a maid came in with the tea-cart and Ernestine began asking as to " one lump or two — cream or sugar or lemon."

" Your dress is so interesting," Thurley remarked to break the lull.

" Thanks. I loathe clothes, yet have to have those dreadful creations when I go on tour — the critics always expect it. They put notices in the social columns, too ! My revenge will come when I am in the perilous forties.

THE GRAY ANGELS

I shall be constantly clad in black chiffon and steel embroideries with ermine and broadcloth for the outer layers. I aspire to be the sort of older-than-I-look-but-not-yet-ancient person who has the proper air of mystery, always an asset, the sure, fine lines of a Helleu dry point, you know."

"No, I don't know," Thurley admitted drolly.

Ernestine clapped her hands. "Fine, we are coming on! Take some more marmalade. Please don't let them spoil you, Thurley, you're so nice as you are. I mean the army of make-overs who assail any one with ability. They have not begun attacks as yet. Wait until you are asked for written recommendations and some one invents a Thurley perfume. Oh, that you might be spared!" She held up her hands in horror.

"Does Mr. Hobart really think I shall be a great singer?" Thurley was experiencing her first stage fright, hence the repetition.

"No one sees him the second time unless he does," Ernestine informed her. "Tell me about yourself. Remember I'm a cross pianist who dislikes having ability and yet would die if I did not. You can trust me, because no one ever comes near me!"

"Don't you adore your work?" Thurley asked in reproach.

Ernestine shook her head. "Really, I think genius is something no other member of your family would countenance, something your ancestors have saved up to hand you unawares. I cannot help playing the piano. They say I even make people *like* Bach, but I wish I could, for it is life to me, after a fashion, and death after another. You cannot mix house-and-garden living and a career any more than oil and water. It must be the choice absolute of one or the other. If a big person marries, she often

THE GRAY ANGELS

marries some one inferior and therein lies disaster. Moral, do not marry."

Thurley's fingers stole inside her pocket to clutch at the corner of Betsey's letter. "But you can be happy, if you do not marry," she said uneasily.

"Has it begun to worry so soon? Wake up, Silver Heels! Tell her there is much else besides the little hopechest crowded with pink-ribboned nighties and cook books." She stirred the Persian kitten with her slipper toe.

"I — I've been engaged," Thurley announced, not knowing why.

"Of course you have, living in a small town and with those eyes! Who was he — not the constable? I could believe anything of you, Thurley, but that!" Ernestine was kindly and teasing all in one.

"Just a nice boy," she said with an effort, "but I gave him up."

"You did wisely. It is the trying to delude ourselves to clutch with one hand for a laurel wreath and for orange blossoms with the other. That is what makes us failures on both sides of the question. You must see Collin's lovely country place up the Hudson, and we must go to some lectures together. Besides, you have all Europe to exclaim over. I'm going to walk through Spain next summer. Come along?"

"I'd love to if — if I have the money —"

"We'll find the money. You must do these things. Bliss is making a little machine out of you with his blessed, idealistic self, hidden like a monk under his habit. Never mind — bright days for Young America — want to hear me play?"

"Would you, really?"

"Listen!" Rising, she went to the piano and began

THE GRAY ANGELS

"The Two Larks," gliding from that into some things of Grieg.

When she finished, Thurley, ruthlessly scattering cake crumbs, came beside her. The timid country girl had vanished. She was the wild-rose Thurley with the "fire, dash, touch of strangeness."

"Let me sing for you! You can tell me the truth, better than Mr. Hobart. Oh, but you can!" she begged.

Ernestine pointed to the shelves of music, but Thurley shook her head.

"I'll play for myself," sitting on the bench beside her hostess.

The chords were few and far between, but the girl's voice rose high and clear with the ethereal quality of a child's, as she sang an old Scotch ballad.

Ernestine Christian drew her to her with a sudden, deft gesture. "Shall I pity or congratulate you?" she asked, her sallow cheeks flushed with excitement.

Then they fell to talking, as women will, of lighter things, and by degrees Thurley found herself in Ernestine Christian's bedroom — a striking affair in yellow lacquered furniture with Chinese designs in gold, ivory walls and huge, black fur rugs which she had brought from Russia. There was point de venise and fillet lace over gray silk for the furniture coverings and a veritable sheath of photographs, among which Thurley found Bliss Hobart's.

Then Thurley found herself taking note of Ernestine's gowns, learning many things which she resolved to put into practice. She discovered that Ernestine Christian had just celebrated her thirtieth birthday and was indifferent to the fact in any way; that Bliss Hobart had had a fever when a lad and hence the grayish hair; that Polly Harris was as good a treat as a fairy pantomime but she carried a heart-break bravely concealed, for she loved

THE GRAY ANGELS

Collin Hedley, the childish, irresponsible artist, and she had not the greatness of genius in herself for which she so longed. Also, there was a Madame Lissa Dagmar whom Ernestine disapproved of but spoke no open ill concerning. This Madame Dagmar threatened the welfare of Mark Wirth, the dancer, for she had fallen in love with him and turned his head with strange notions, and, lastly, this Thurley's woman heart told her, Ernestine Christian loved the popular, irreverent novelist, Caleb Patmore, but she believed marriage would interfere with his work as well as her own, so she steadfastly stood him off in that tantalizing fashion common to women of brilliant attainments and childish, hungry hearts.

When Thurley left her, the sting as to Lorraine and Dan's engagement had been spirited away — she knew not how. Perhaps it was the graceful way in which Ernestine had welcomed her, the new surroundings, the music, the confidences about these "stars in the artistic firmament," as Birge's Corners would have expressed it, the knowledge she was to be one of the sacred family which had hidden its existence even from press agents, or, thrilling thought, that she was to be famous and rich — or was it none of these? Was it that Thurley learned more about Bliss Hobart? — that he was an idealist who seldom expressed ideals, lest they become trampled upon and return to him in cynical disguise; that he was not old but young in fact and unmarried, and, as yet, interested in no woman personally save as his two friends, Polly and Ernestine, amused him; and, best of all, that he told Ernestine to be particularly nice to Thurley Precore, nicer than she had been to any other girl he had trained and presented to the public!

CHAPTER XII

Hobart did invite Thurley to the family dinner party. With customary tardiness the invitation did not reach her until the afternoon of the day, late afternoon in fact, after a fatiguing round of "polishings off," as she dubbed them, and an hour with Miss Clergy during which she had read aloud from an archaic little romance and had listened to the ghost-lady murmur her opinions.

Very swiftly it was becoming clear to Thurley that fame, even the great, dazzling fame of which the work-a-day world reads with awe, merely meant one had a different standard of values; that all emotions such as joy, sorrow, anger, renunciation, cowardice, heroism and so on were relative. Tom Jones and wife and child in Skiddeoot, Missouri, might attain as great joy over acquiring a terrifically green-colored bungalow and veneered mahogany to decorate the parlor, while Mrs. Tom was to have a woman to wash, and Mr. Tom membership in the Skiddeoot bowling club — quite as much joy as Ernestine Christian when she stayed at Buckingham Palace an honored guest and had on her dressing table the miniatures of the young princes and a certain jewelled box given her by the king of Italy. The lives of these luminaries, when one came to know them on equal footing, were composed of a multitude of trivial details, the same as were the Joneses' of Skiddeoot — the proper breakfast food, annoyance of a thunder shower, the wrong-sized-gaiters, the intense dislike of parsnips, the fondness for Japanese prints, the staunch conviction as to when the world was to

THE GRAY ANGELS

end, the way to eat one's melons (in Skiddeoot it would be porridge), the best style of spring motor car (in Skiddeoot it would be whether to have the Ford wheels red or yellow)—and so on through an endless list of things about which physical and mental existence is centered.

Thurley had been exceptionally spared the grind and slow advancement of the average artist. On the other hand, she had experienced both grind and decidedly depressing experiences during her travels in the box-car. She was now placed, as it were, in the front ranks of the artistic world and allowed to gaze about, investigate, presume, acquire knowledge, as much as her own possibilities would permit. Her possibilities being above the average, Thurley, inside of the few months in New York, had come to the settled conviction that folks were really just folks no matter how they were dressed, and the artists quite the same as the population of Birge's Corners, only in a different setting and with a different set of values.

It was rather disappointing to come to the conclusion, not at all romantic and stimulating or in keeping with the conclusions Caleb Patmore's "Victorious Victoria" had arrived at in an amazingly short space of time. It was like a child's suddenly being put on everyday relations with Santa Claus himself and finding out, besides his ability to ride reindeer skyward, and, toy-laden, shoot down narrow chimneys, that he had a gouty foot the same as Oyster Jim's, was rather caustic if his eggs were overdone, was a Republican, body, boots and breeches, the same as Ali Baba, and, if he lost three games of cribbage straight running, was distinctly "peevd."

So Thurley advanced beyond the illusions of the uninitiated. Before she came into Bliss Hobart's dominion she had been one of the public, the sort of public who

THE GRAY ANGELS

believe newspaper reports of opera singers having frolicsome boa-constrictors as family pets, to welcome them when they stagger home under van-loads of orchids from the evening's work! She saw now with the clear, innocent eyes of youth, which is so often wiser than dictatorial and narrow middle age, that the common lot was the universal lot and that in the sum total of all things the famous ones were spared no more nor less nor given greater qualities of endurance or supreme power.

Had the invitation to the "family" dinner come a week ago, Thurley would have hesitated before accepting. But Ernestine Christian's personality — as yet it was not Ernestine Christian's real self since she betrayed that to no one — had woven a big-sister armor about Thurley's wild-rose self. She was eager to become one of the family, unconscious of the honor for which many had sighed and bribed for in vain. She showed the note to Miss Clergy and became very flapperlike on the subject of her costume.

"Wear any you like," Miss Clergy said fondly. "Dear me, I sha'n't go. I'm an old lady, sleepy as an infant by half after eight."

"Must I always be alone?" Thurley protested.

Miss Clergy, whose girlhood had been bounded on all sides by the "Polite Letter Writer" and "Godey's Lady's Book," hesitated. "Take a maid," she urged.

"For protection? Goodness, no! Why, I've walked at midnight in the darkest road at home, when Philena would be taken very ill and we had to have the north end doctor. I'll go alone — and wear my green velvet."

"If you want more dresses —" began Miss Clergy cheerily. When one had a wild-rose girl with the voice of a lark, revenge just naturally lost its grim and ugly aspects.

THE GRAY ANGELS

But Thurley shook her head and vanished, singing snatches of her exercises and finding out that she was not so tired as she had fancied; the languor had magically vanished. She propped Hobart's tantalizing note on her dressing table as she did her hair.

Thurley —

Come and be christened at seven-thirty. The family must know the baby.

B. H.

Thurley deliberately powdered her face and added a soupçon of superfluous rouge. She was thinking, "Now I shall know the real man, the real Bliss Hobart," dropping into a hum instead of singing aloud, always a symptom of rare joy.

Presently she appeared to say good night to Miss Clergy, a radiant young person looking, as Caleb Patmore said afterwards, "an up-to-date historical romance bound in green velvet and silver lace." But she was disappointed in Hobart's apartment, for she realized at a glance it was only more of his "setting"; that here he existed as Bliss Hobart the critic and master, not Bliss Hobart the man. It was equally as awesome as his studio offices, but in a more distinguished, definite style. There was rare, decorative wall paper, with shellacked panels set in the yellow, marbled walls reproducing the design made by David for the great Napoleon. Black, velvety carpet covered the tiled floors, the chairs were of deep mouse color edged with gold fringe, there were pale gray hangings against shell pink satin screens and a tiled Portuguese mantel of blue and yellow.

She found Ernestine Christian and Caleb Patmore waging a lively argument, with Bliss Hobart enjoying it

THE GRAY ANGELS

hugely. Nor did they stop after Thurley's bashful entrance and Hobart's introduction,

"The family infant! Remember, 'children should be seen and not heard.' There's the chair for you, and if you are very 'pie' and don't contradict your elders, you'll be rewarded later."

Thurley accepted the rôle gladly. It was evident they considered her a promising infant. Some day she would be able to tell them the same half-patronizing things or be introducing some other prodigy into the family in equally clever, blasé fashion. That first and memorable dinner party was more of an education than all the lessons Thurley had endured since her New York advent. Here she saw the demonstration of the theories taught her regarding form, cleverness and so on. Long before the evening was ended, she felt she could now dispense with the social secretary, the beauty doctor and the gymnast. She had only to observe her "family" and practise the results of the observation before her mirror.

"We are waiting for Polly Harris and Collin Hedley," Hobart remarked during a lull in the battle. "Polly is as punctual as an alarm clock, but Collin would not be on time at his own funeral, if it were possible. We always give him a half hour leeway and never mind because Polly is such fun when she rages."

Thurley murmured some reply, and then Caleb Patmore, who had been looking at her almost rudely, began anew his argument. Despite his depraved ideas regarding novel writing, Thurley liked him. He had the clean-cut business air which she admired, rather than the air of the proverbial long-haired novelist with a hemstitched neck scarf.

"Of course we respect Daphne," he said grudgingly. "For five years she has made her living writing poetry —

THE GRAY ANGELS

POETRY — and how many can say as much? No bribes of the corset makers for limerick advertisements ever tempted her, but now she has sensibly surrendered in favor of marrying one Oscar Human, Indiana plumber at large. The only remarkable thing about it is that Oscar Human would marry a failure poetess who must have forgotten how to cook a boiled dinner or be interested in the new style nickel fittings! Well, luck to Daphne Rhodes, but what good was it all? A starved, embittered space filler, she admitted, soothing a makeup man's difficulties by rounding out the page with a plump sonnet."

Ernestine walked over to the mantel in order to look as majestic as possible, so Hobart called out. She was very lovely in her crystal colored satin with silvery panels and those interesting, homely hands of hers clasped awkwardly.

"You do love fleshpots, Caleb, no matter whether an Indiana plumber or an editor bestows them. You'll have Daphne taking orders for your next novel, I dare say — a premium with every new kitchen sink Oscar installs! You wretch! I've no doubt Daphne is going to be happy, at least her experience as a poetess will mercifully teach her never to let this Oscar know how commonplace he is. Therein will lie the success of the union. As soon as Polly comes, we'll decide on the wedding present. For my part, I think Daphne has done a brave thing to hold to the best in herself, and, when she saw she was unable to attain her goal, to drop back gracefully into the house-and-garden rank and file."

Caleb shrugged his shoulders. "Well, long ago I became tired of being a literary chameleon and trying to match up every editor's bark! I found out what the reading public wanted and I have given it to them —

THE GRAY ANGELS

great hunks of it! I haven't come out so badly, eh? Now, Daphne could have done the same." He leaned back in his chair looking defiantly at Ernestine.

"You are trying to make me the man in the divorce case; his wife took the furniture and the five children and he took the blame. But I challenge you, Caleb, to prove that you have ever really written a good story — a story you felt and loved and were willing to fight for until it was printed."

"You've never gone through my attic trunks," he reminded. "Besides, the public doesn't like highbrow stories. They like stories about people who are capable of wearing pink underwear, and a villain must be a villain if found carrying a riding crop. Just when I am settled in my mind concerning my next heroine, Ernestine breaks out with uplift, as annoying as to have a motor stuffed with relatives drive up to the door at dinner time," he informed Hobart. "Can't you lend a hand?"

"How can I, when I want to stay friends with you both? By Jove, there's the bell; they've arrived."

Ernestine blew Caleb a kiss and murmured, "If one cannot write *au naturel*, I presume it must be *au gratin*!"

Then there swept into the room two of the strangest and most delightful persons Thurley had ever seen. Collin Hedley came first, a fair-haired, boyish man with eyes so joyous and brilliant one could not look at them for long, and the bristly head of the plebeian with deep incurvation of the temples. He was most carelessly dressed, but no one would have noticed that as long as his eyes smiled; he had a mad Van Dyke beard and a lovable yet combative mouth which might or might not prophesy many things.

But it was Polly Harris who captivated Thurley's heart and made her forget her shyness. Polly had the fash-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ion of bombarding one's self-consciousness. She could have changed the saying, "A cat may look at a king" to "a cat may order a king." Even Bliss Hobart lost dignity in her presence.

"Polly can teach you to write *vers libre* on your cuff and tell a Chicago art patron from a Pittsburg coal dealer at a distance of fifty yards," was Hobart's universal recommendation. But Polly Harris could do a great deal more.

She reminded one, although her age was less than Ernestine's, of October sunshine, partly because she was a tiny, wood-brown thing, an oddity, a fact she well knew, flat-chested as a boy, with tanned skin, eyes like topazes, if she were happy, and her brown hair bobbed like a child's and fastened with a ridiculous velvet bow. Her dresses were inevitably the same — since her income was likewise — Polly's regimentals, they called them, brown corduroy for winter, made in semi-smock, semi-Eton-jacket style with an abbreviated skirt and stout little boots laced as if for a walking tour. In the summer Polly appeared in brown cotton made in similar fashion and when she was dragged to some formal affair she would be induced to wear her "heirloom," a brocaded brown velvet which Ernestine had brought from Paris. Polly was just Polly with her crisp little voice, a heart of gold and a tongue which could be sharp as a battle lance or as tender as pink rosebuds.

"The only sprite in captivity," the family dubbed her, pitying her impossible aim — to write grand opera — and never hinting what tragedy lay before her when the tanned face would wrinkle and the bobbed hair turn gray. It was as probable that Polly Harris could write a grand opera as that Betsey Pilrig could lead the Russian ballet — but Polly, as so often happens in the case

THE GRAY ANGELS

of "captured sprites," saw none of the absurdity encasing her ambitions.

No one knew just how she lived, for she had the fierce pride of failures. "Sure 'nuff" successes or "comers" are always more amenable to loans and helping hands. In her sky parlor, the tiptop room in a bohemian New York rooming house, Polly somehow wrested from fate and the world at large a living. Limericks and hack work of hideous monotony and starvation wage with the pride of her family behind her! Her father had been an Ohio judge and her grandfather a senator, while Polly, alone and without resources, had wilfully burned family bridges some years before and drifted to New York to write her operas.

Even Polly admitted the first operas were hopeless, bravely burning them as one does old love letters. But grand opera remained her goal; nothing less would or could satisfy her. After seven desperate years of work and insufficient means, Polly had become one of the family of the very great and was envied by all; it meant, however, that she took from this family not one jot of aid or influence nor permitted them to know whether "we are eating to-day or we are moving our belt strap into the next hole."

Sometimes the family outwitted Polly Harris and helped her in spite of herself, but more often they knew it was kindest to not try. So they did the finest thing of all because the girl's fine self deserved and demanded it — they took her in as one of them and talked of the day her operas should be sung, listening to her pitiful dreams as kindly as they would have listened to Wagner could he have been among them telling of his Rhinegold! Polly had become a character in artistic New York and when the near-great enviously urged her to make use of

THE GRAY ANGELS

the truly great, to accept some easy position as secretary or companion to this celebrity or that, Polly's eyes would change to angry, storm things and she would turn on them with the threat that they would still see her win out, some day the great theme would come to her and the world admit her success! Then she would repay the beloved family for their kindness in not forcing old clothes and baskets of food, loans of money — as one tipped a maid. Polly would be famous, as famous as Ernestine Christian or Bliss or the lazy deceiver of a Caleb or Collin Hedley whom Polly loved in strange fashion although he was honestly unconscious of the fact.

Until then painting lamp shades at night, writing wretched verse for some wretched publication, doing a child's song cycle for almost the cost of the music paper, harmonizing impossible marching songs, substituting at a Harlem movie house as the piano player — none of these was too mean for Polly to do since they sustained her until the day the great theme should whisper itself!

"The thing which keeps Polly afloat," Ernestine had declared, "is that she is glad for every one else who wins out — it has made her so sunny hearted she just can't go under."

Polly approached Thurley with open arms, saying in her crisp fashion, "Bliss tells me you have never known father, mother nor telephone number and we can baby you all we like," bending down unexpectedly to kiss her.

Before Thurley answered, Polly whirled around to demand, "Listen, every one, I've come to the conclusion we should all be thankful for anything that makes cold chills go up and down our spines," dashing into some nonsensical adventure told in her own fashion.

Hobart waited until the conclusion, after which he

THE GRAY ANGELS

offered Thurley his arm and led the way into the dining room which proved to be an enclosed sort of terrace with wonderfully imitated flowering shrubs, green striped awnings, a lily pool fountain giving a touch of the unreal and illusive. Wicker chairs, artificial ascension lilies and Canterbury bells were in profusion. The room was called the "village green," Caleb whispered to Thurley, and on nights when the thermometer skidded below zero, Hobart delighted to come into this exquisite little oasis of almost tropical heat and make his guests forget the sleet and frost without. Two chairs were tipped against their well appointed places, one for Mark Wirth, the dancer, and one for Sam Sparling, the actor, Thurley learned, a family custom always observed.

As they sat about the table, Thurley between Polly and Collin, Polly remarked naïvely:

"I'm trying to get Collin to tell me why women who dabble in water colors always paint 'Pharaoh's Horses' with chests like inflated, tuppenny balloons?"

"How can a mere painter of fried egg sunsets answer?" he retorted. "Oh, I say, about Daphne's wedding present — Polly doesn't want to send it."

At which a chorus of "why nots" issued, to which Polly said forcibly:

"Because it will remind her of what she can never have. Pick out some nice, golden oak and green plush article which will do credit to the establishment of one Oscar Human, plumber at large. It will be salve on a throbbing wound. Daphne will think, bless her amateurish old heart, that it is *our* choice and being typical of the golden oak and green plush atmosphere which must always be hers, she'll still feel one of us! But that green metal desk set with silver trim — horrors, think of its shivering with loneliness in Oscar's back parlor!"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Right," Hobart added, "I'll get the picture of a wistful tabby cat staring at oysters fairly shivering in their shells and a battenberg doily underneath — no, that would be too broad — we'll get — I say, here's our infant fresh from Birge's Corners and Birge's Corners' brides — nearly one herself if the truth were known! What ho, Thurley, what would you propose to give a Birge's Corners' bride that would meet the town's approval?"

Flushing as she thought of Lorraine's chest of linens, the new house which was to cost twenty thousand dollars — and then of Ernestine's necklace which cost that alone — Thurley, without hesitation, answered, "Why, a cut glass punch bowl with the silver hooks all around it for the little glasses!"

"The infant is christened," Hobart pronounced after the applause ended. "I nominate a shopping committee of Ernestine Christian and Thurley Precore."

During the rest of the supper party Thurley remained a spectator until Hobart whispered that she sing for them and she rose, for the first time in her life, reluctant to obey.

"She has not done well," she heard Hobart saying as she finished, "stage fright — too few of us — too small a room — the opera stage, five thousand people and she would sing as if her throat were copper lined — however —"

Polly Harris finished the sentence for him. "However, if Ernestine wisely realizes the limitations of the pianoforte, Thurley Precore will never have to realize the limitations of her voice."

Caleb took Ernestine and Thurley home in his machine, Collin and Polly following in the former's roadster. Being the infant, Thurley was left at her hotel first

THE GRAY ANGELS

of all with fond good nights and quips about the sandman's speedy arrival! She regretted that she was not allowed to whirl about taking Polly home and then Collin and then Ernestine and, finally, to be left alone with this rich, willful novelist-slacker and have him tell about his world even as Ernestine had hinted of hers.

As she undressed, the memories of the evening being rehearsed by her dramatic self and shamedly admitting she had been a stupid country lass who had not sung one-tenth as well as she could, Thurley realized another valuable thing, one which the public does not take the pains to decipher, that artists, in order to be successes, must, *per se*, acquire definite and almost narrow ways and methods of living such as dressing, recreation and so on, *their personalities must crystallize and become impenetrable to the onslaught of the personalities which they will undertake to interpret or create.* Here, in part, lies the secret of fame. Once one has one's own self quite modelled and secure from invasion, the tortures of creation and interpretation become but the day's work just as the man with grimy hands polishes the most expensive limousine body and returns homeward via a street car.

The members of the family had distinct and original personalities — true, they did not seem to be the complement of their forms of artistic achievement; Collin's pictures never reminded one of Collin nor Ernestine's programs have many of her own favorites, but back of their work, a haven to temperament, stood these people's personalities which carried them bravely on the tidal wave of success. Whether or not something else stood behind these personalities and formed the universal trinity of expression was to be determined later — when one did not suggest cut glass punch bowls with hooks as wedding gifts!

THE GRAY ANGELS

But as Thurley lay down to sleep, too excited to remember Birge's Corners, she determined with amusing worldliness to set to work developing her own personality, to both pamper and crystallize it, pitting it against this wild rose Thurley who blushed and who sneezed — unpoetic truth — just when she should not!

CHAPTER XIII

Instead of the Christmas season making Thurley homesick, it lent a vivacious joy that caused Ernestine Christian and Polly Harris to marvel at her development. The atmosphere of the city had its foothold. She thought, if at all, of the Christmas preparations in Birge's Corners, with passing scorn.

Thurley's thoughts had been rather well regulated by routine until she was left with but scant time for reminiscence. No lesson had been done away with but more added. She spent twice as much time at Hobart's studio, either with him or with the Bohemian singing teacher whom she loathed but who knew how to guide her voice into unsurpassed channels.

Then there were hateful languages to conquer and, if she disliked the social secretary or the gymnast or the corps of other workers who were making her "ready" to sing for her supper on the opera stage, they continued to appear at regular intervals until Thurley realized that Bliss Hobart had had method in his madness, for he had seen the need of curbing a rebellious and turbulent spirit, one that tired too quickly of routine for its own good. In reality, he was teaching her the grind, which most artists never escape, in a condensed and merciful fashion.

Thurley was beginning to realize even more of this great question of "values." In the old days at the Corners when gray, sullen moods conquered her sunny self, she had been wont to take refuge within the box-

THE GRAY ANGELS

car wagon or the hilly cemetery, to sob without reason or plan rebellions of which neither Dan nor Betsey Pilrig could have had the slightest understanding! Now she called a taxi and drove through the parks or out suburban roads, thinking the same quality of thoughts with different and widely varied guises and returning, as she had done from the box-car wagon or cemetery, light hearted, dangerously glad for every one, singing like a meadow lark and insisting on doing things for whosoever might come her way almost to the extent of exaggeration.

Formerly, when saddish longings and presentiments would sweep over the wild rose Thurley, she had tramped through the pine woods as sturdily as a soldier under his captain's orders, tramping, tramping, tramping up through the amphitheater of hills which lay outside the town. Finally, she would come upon a pasture clearing and here she would sit, exhausted but filled with sweet contentment, at the "top of the world" she fondly called it, looking down at the little village which seemed a cardboard play-town and dreaming of the day when she should stand at the top of the world to sing and all the cardboard towns in the universe should listen and applaud.

In New York, Thurley took another method when pessimism interrupted common sense routine. She went to the piano and practised until her throat gave warning to cease and she could again face the world as the wild-rose-with-a-prophecy-of-the-hot-house-variety Thurley, baby of the great "family," an interesting young goddess who seldom voiced an opinion but who could sweep away opinions if she sang a ballad (unbeknownst to her present audience) with thoughts of Dan or Philena or the old days in the wagon as the inspiration!

THE GRAY ANGELS

During those effervescent moods of abandon which fairly intoxicated all those who saw Thurley under their spell — back in the Corners — she had always rushed down to the emporium and coaxed Dan away on a frolic — a picnic, if summer, or skating, if winter. They would sit, these two, on the porch of a deserted lake mansion dreaming dreams of a lyric quality with a sincerity which made both the boy and the girl the better for having dreamed them! Thurley would weave garlands of wild flowers — Dan gathering them — and she would come home to Betsey Pilrig, her cheeks like roses and her eyes like stars, singing a spring song and causing Betsy to lapse into Ali Baba's favorite expression, "Land sakes and Mrs. Davis — Thurley, be you from another world?"

The joyous moods, these days, came very seldom. To some degree they happened when Ernestine told her that Hobart was pleased with her progress or when Polly Harris kissed her and said she was a little sister to the great; some faint imitation of them was experienced when Caleb took her motoring and told her his humorous troubles or when she went with Miss Clergy and Hobart to the first opera — "Rigoletto" — and saw with the grave, conceited eyes of youth herself outshining the present *Gilda* — herself standing with outstretched arms to acknowledge the applause. The wild joy was felt for half an instant when Collin Hedley said he would paint the infant before her début — there would be no fun at all in painting her when she was famous and unapproachable, waving engagement tablets at a mere artist.

Thurley came to realize clearly the difference in the inspiration of her joy — the joy which had been her solace during the gray, hungry days of childhood. In

THE GRAY ANGELS

Birge's Corners supreme mirth came from smell of new mown hay, with sunshine sparkling all about, or the summer breeze kissing the little curls at the delicious nape of her white, soft neck — it was generated by the discovery of the first violets or the exhilaration of a skating party with Dan, by some baby's laughing face or Betsey's pleased smile — and most of all by Dan's ardor. Thurley told herself with almost shamed admission that her values had changed.

But if Thurley changed quickly during the winter, Miss Clergy stayed the same feeble, at times querulous, ghost lady, always willing for Thurley to go to places without her, trusting the girl as one would trust a matron, content, now that she had roused from her neurotic lethargy, to lapse into a semi-dozzle with a vigilant eye for only two things — to have Thurley succeed as a *spinster* and to have no one become personally acquainted with her own withered self lest memories be unearthed over which she mourned in vain.

So Thurley came and went at will and the family became used to the fact that the infant's benefactress was a "character." For that matter the family themselves were characters with pet "phobias" and hobbies and theories, to say nothing of scars, cotton-wooled and well protected from the bromidic world.

It was Christmas week when Thurley experienced a savage mood — anger really the stimulus — for she had bought a supply of frocks and hats preparatory to the "family's" Christmas festivities when Ernestine wrote her a note from Chicago, where she was playing engagements, saying that she would not be home until January and she was writing before Christmas purposely because she never had believed in the holiday and neither gave nor accepted gifts; therefore she wished the child-

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley all good things and to work as hard as she could; she would see her within a few weeks.

The savage mood began to manifest itself as Thurley read the careless note. Like the writer, its force and decision were unquestionable. Thurley had prepared gifts for all members of the family in the same impulsive fashion as for every one she had loved back at the Corners. She went to the bureau drawer and opened it to examine them — they seemed garish and absurd. She was not yet at the topnotch of fame which allows one to do whatsoever one will and have it accepted. If she had made her debut and chosen to present Ernestine Christian with one of those gilded rolling pins with a regiment of hooks which hung on the doors of many of the best families in the Corners, it would have been received in resigned silence. As it was, the purse she had chosen for Ernestine was probably not at all what she would have liked; Thurley would give it to the room maid instead. She would think it quite wonderful and carry it for shopping or Sunday mass!

She looked at the handkerchiefs she had for Polly Harris — but Polly would probably make some sarcastic squib at their expense and never be seen with one protruding from her smock pocket. No, the handkerchiefs would do for the social secretary and the antique leather box for Caleb she would press upon the gymnast, while the book on art originally intended for Collin would be relegated to the scrap heap! Thurley laughed aloud as she thought of giving Collin a book on art — when Collin, foremost portrait painter in America, had written a book on art which was used as an authority by the younger school . . . well, it had not been so very long since she had bought her gifts at Dan's store with Dan refusing her money and had done them up in white tissue

THE GRAY ANGELS

and the reddest of red ribbon, flying about like a good fairy on Christmas Eve to leave them at doorsteps! After re-reading Ernestine's note, Thurley came to the conclusion that Christmas was not for those afflicted with exaggerated ego but merely for those who held good jobs.

She had bought no present for Sam Sparling or Mark Wirth, the latter still abroad, and as for Bliss Hobart, her fingers fearfully touched the carved idol — a metal Buddha mounted on teakwood. Why she had selected it, after endless excursions to endless shops, Thurley did not know — perhaps it was because she had never seen one in his office where there was everything else under the sun from a Filipino kris to a bibelot which had belonged to Marie Antoinette. Or perhaps there was another reason — at any rate, she had recklessly bought the idol and sacrificed her spending money for a month to come, blushing furiously each time she planned what to write on the accompanying card.

She could hardly give the Buddha to a bellboy and she had purchased black gloves for Miss Clergy, the presents for Betsey, Ali Baba and Hopeful being on their way.

She pushed the Buddha back in the drawer and went to her lesson with Hobart with a reserved, patronizing manner which amused him and his amusement, in turn, angered Thurley.

Fame seemed something which would strangle everything commonplace and joyous, Thurley thought, as she mechanically did her exercises. These persons were so *ultra*, so fond of "my taste in dress" — "the way I eat my artichokes" — "the sort of wall paper in my studio" — so over developed and emphasized that they made clever, well bred fun of the "pastoral joys," as Ernestine

THE GRAY ANGELS

named them, all the while amusingly unconscious of the whine of conceit which crept into their voices whenever they made a drastic statement.

There ought to be a refined, sulphitic, fumigated holiday just for this sort of people, Thurley thought. She was driving home and watching the crowds of shoppers laden with packages who tried to make their way across the street. They were goodnatured crowds because they were buying something for some one else and she longed to leave the cab and be one with them, to jostle and sway together until the traffic signal was given and then to dash across to reach a crosstown car and to end, breathless, disordered of hat and hair but happy, in some small home where the packages were relegated to the top shelf and a recital of the day's happenings told to the master of the household over a supper of steak, coffee and baker's pie!

Up to this moment Thurley had not experienced homesickness, but as the cab shot on in patrician fashion she began recalling the fattened turkey they would have at Birge's Corners and the way Betsey had made her pudding and Christmas cakes days before, as well as the nights Dan had called for her to have her aid in trimming the store windows with make-believe fireplaces and tinsel stars; the way the boys and girls went into the woods for the smallest fir trees and decorated the church until it was "a bower of beauty," according to the *Gazette* report; how the choir would practise the Christmas anthem and carols night after night with Thurley directing, playing the organ and singing. On Christmas morning would come the service with Thurley, the envy of every girl in town because of her new pin or bracelet or chain which Dan had given her, singing "The Birthday of a King" in a glorious, clear voice — like

THE GRAY ANGELS

some one permitted to sing down from the clouds for an instant!

Oh, it was good to remember — *good?* — Thurley's eyes filled with tears. She told the man to drive on until she ordered him to turn back to her hotel. She laughed as she snuggled down in the machine, drawing a robe over her lap and prepared to dream-remember. As she did so, she recalled Caleb Patmore's saying to Ernestine one afternoon at tea,

"I'm going into the ooze again." To which Ernestine answered,

"Jolly lark, isn't it? Don't make it a habit or you may slip into it altogether — then you would be helpless."

"Take the advice for yourself," he had retorted, to which she nodded her head and the subject was dropped. When Thurley asked her about it, Ernestine said with a trace of confusion,

"You child, you're not ready for any 'ooze' game yet; you are still in it in actuality to an extent. When you begin to want to go to nerve specialists and are not hungry enough for bread and butter but keen on frosted cake as it were, knowing nothing but work and wanting to know nothing but play, when your day's program — not the one written by your press agent — is as impossible as a typewritten love letter, you'll find the ooze. I'll show you how to find it."

But Thurley had insisted, like a true Pandora, upon knowing and so Ernestine goodnaturedly tried to explain.

"My nice creature, when people are so famous they experience loneliness because they are quite shut away from those who are quite famous, they cannot exist on work no matter in what line their talent may be — nor

THE GRAY ANGELS

on lollipop praise of the public nor carping criticisms. They must have an antidote. Yet they cannot sacrifice their relentless system of life which takes a first mortgage on their time and energy. So while you hear of us as having huge poultry farms and see our pictures taken in the act of garroting a red pepper from Madame So and So's truck farm where she spends most of her time when not — and so on, or read an interview in which one of us declares a submarine boat to be our favorite siesta spot, please know it is not true. But throughout the years of endless work and surrender of the mystical force constituting genius, we have just to be children — and pretend. There, that is the whole thing in a nutshell — pretend just as children fancy themselves policemen, motormen, kings and fairy queens all the while swallowing the mortification of domineering nurses and bibs. We live with our memories, many times, if they are pleasant. How rich a confession Caleb could wring out of us, if he were not so sluggish! We dream-play, fancy, create a world within a world. Bliss Hobart in a fit of cynicism — I noticed he began taking pepsin the following week — named it 'the ooze' — and it became our trade name for it. The ooze, the unreal, really unimportant and absurd, yet ready to be lived with and yet to vanish, the state of mind which we people as we wish and live house-and-garden lives for as much as half an hour at a time! You may not give this credence, but it is quite as real as my piano or Collin's brush. And heaven grant you won't need the ooze, Thurley, for a little! Still, it is a lovely, plastic state of thought — like those lavender and gold butterflies you find lingering in the corners of Whistler's paintings or that flutter in the margins of special editions."

"Why don't you have the — the ooze be real — live

THE GRAY ANGELS

a fifty-fifty sort of existence?" Thurley borrowed Dan's slang.

"It would be like blending chillblains and poetry or mosquitoes and mahogany — impossible! That is why they say all genius is a trifle mad. Remember, the ooze is your best friend! Why, after a fatiguing concert, I've played I was the bustling, happy mother of half a dozen youngsters, the type of American housewife who does all her work except the washing and whose hands grow red and hardened yet are sparkling with diamonds, whose children grow up and adore her — I've lived in a red brick house with those diamond-shaped panes at the front windows and dotted muslin curtains criss-crossed — you know — and I've entertained bridge clubs galore, making mayonnaise and maple parfait myself while the baby was napping —" and when Thurley had clamored for a clearer understanding, Ernestine ordered her off to study her French and forget she shared the secret of the "ooze."

"What is Bliss Hobart's ooze?" she had insisted.

"I think he plays he runs an ice cream soda fountain in Harlem," Ernestine had answered to be rid of her. At the time Thurley had seriously questioned Ernestine's sanity.

But this snowy December night the ooze became very real to her and, unknowingly, Thurley passed a telling boundary line of progress. She dreamed on of Birge's Corners — she saw the Christmas entertainment taking place. There was the awful make-believe chimney which the Sunday-school superintendent, invariably the thinnest man in town, was to descend, fragments of his cotton beard floating about the stage after the feat was accomplished. She could see the primary class waving the red satin banner symbolic of the best attendance —

THE GRAY ANGELS

strange, how excellent is the Sunday-school attendance during holiday season — and then marching on the stage to sing in a series of mouse-like squeaks, "Jolly Old Saint Nicholas" while their teacher, in love with Jo Drummer, the Santa Claus, stood below to direct them and wonder if Jo was properly impressed with her maternal devotion and her new hat.

Then the minister "delivered" a few remarks and Lorraine came on the stage to hand out tarlatan stockings with nuts and hard candies which accompanied the gifts. After laborious recitations by tortured boys with slicked-back hair and freckles pale because of the excitement, the town elocutionist let loose with "How They Brought the Good News from Aix to Ghent" or "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and about at this juncture the stage chimney would crash down and reveal the truth — it was nothing but a lot of brick-paper pasted on Dan Birge's store boxes!

Well, it was fun to play that one was taking part in the entertainment and showing off a little, as every one else did, including the minister, to smell, in imagination, the pines and evergreens and to visualize Dan Birge, the handsomest lad in the assemblage, winking at her during the minister's address!

The river wind swept in through the lowered taxicab window-pane and Thurley leaned forward to say, "Home, please" — the ooze drifting obediently away. She was Thurley Precore, the Thurley with rejected Christmas gifts and the prospect of a hotel holiday dinner in company with Miss Clergy who would nap most of the day!

Yet the ooze had stimulated Thurley; she could always go slipping back to the Corners to relive the homey things which had made her a wild rose. It appeared

THE GRAY ANGELS

to be tremendously comforting and she went a step further in self-analysis, telling herself, as she was going up to the hotel rooms, that the thing which made great people lapse into the ooze for tangled up nerves and snarly frames of mind was the thing which made sarcastic, aloof Ernestine Christian play a gypsy dance with the wild fire its author intended it to have or gave Caleb the power to invent an entirely new setting for the same old, "Will you love me?" or told Collin how to forget the ingrowing chin of his subject and make it strong and masterful still. *looking like* the ingrowing original — here, Thurley took the lesson home for she, too, was crystallizing her personality. It gave Thurley the ability to feel that she was Juliet in the tomb or Rosina having that delightful music lesson with her masquerading lover, it was temperament, psychic masquerading! There, that was a much nicer name than the ooze and when she was famous enough she would tell Bliss Hobart so and make him admit his clumsiness of nomenclature.

After which exhilaration came the hint of a warning — Miss Clergy's years of uselessness were the result of just such "psychic masquerading" fed by revenge and disappointment. After all, was this ooze merely confined to the great? Would they not have to yield a point and admit they had much in common with their neighbors?

CHAPTER XIV

When she came into the apartment sitting-room, she found Polly Harris in her shabby brown trappings and another member of the family whom Polly had dutifully brought to call.

"It's Sam Sparling," Polly announced in boyish fashion. "Have you seen by the papers he's to open here Christmas afternoon? This is Bliss Hobart's prize," waving her hand in Thurley's direction. "Now beware of Sam because even duchesses fall in love with him and he has trunks full of yellowed mash notes —"

Sam interrupted by frowning at Polly and saying, "Come over here, my dear, don't be afraid. I'm too busy to get up a new affair before New Year's."

He had the cultured, pleasant voice of a well-bred Englishman and Thurley could picture his irresistible methods of love-making, although he was far older than she fancied and his mouth framed by ironical furrows. He had really white hair combed into a brisk pompadour, bright eyes like a young pointer's and he dressed in noticeable fashion, with a fine black and white check suit with exaggerated flares, patent leather boots and silk shirt and tie matching the suit in pattern. Still, it was no wonder Sam Sparling could "get across" with *Romeo* one day and the next week be giving out an interview in which he was quoted as remembering the day Disraeli said to him —!

"What a dear she is!" he remarked to Polly. He had the habit of talking about a person in front of that person when he wished to be complimentary or to find

THE GRAY ANGELS

fault. "A flapper in a thousand," putting on gold *pince-nez* with the foreign straight-across nose-piece which Thurley had never seen. "By Jove, is Bliss sure she's a singer? I could make an actress out of that girl."

"You've not heard her sing," Polly capered about. "When she sings, I am inspired to tear up all the opera scores I've fancied were any good and begin again. Because Thurley has promised me to sing the title rôle in my opera — now haven't you?" Polly's little face was distressingly in earnest.

Sam shook his head and began talking to Thurley about Polly. "She is irrepressible, isn't she? Fancies she can out-Wagner Wagner — when she is just bound to end up by writing songs for a ballad singer — one dressed in sheer muslin with velvet wrist bows — possessing a thin, carefully tutored soprano that will always trill certain words."

Polly picked up a cushion and unceremoniously pitched it towards him. It fell between Thurley and Sam and Sam knelt gracefully upon it, adding, "Would that I could have one of these when I'm trying to look romantic in this position before a *matinée* of school girls — ugh, the old bones do make a howl if I use them carelessly! Thurley, don't mind us! You see I'm one of those old-young boys that just stay old-young to the finish — always wearing a gardenia in their buttonhole and their hat tilted rakishly over the left eye. Some day I'll just go to sleep and I'll be toted to the Little Church Around the Corner with a last gardenia in my buttonhole and I hope some friend of mine will protest against that awful firebell embellished funeral march. At least I'm entitled to have the Faust waltz played — I always have my greatest luck with stage proposals when that is softly heard as coming from the supposed supper room of a

THE GRAY ANGELS

hunt ball — and a bill poster without saying, 'The End of an Old Beau!' After it is all over, I hope they'll say, 'Well, Sam never grew old while he was among us — let's hope he won't start the habit now wherever he's blown off to!'"

He jumped up as he finished, holding out his hand, and Thurley took it shyly.

"Don't mind our nonsense — she's quite timid, isn't she? Reminds me of the way my leading ladies act when on the stage and when off they rage like a stable boy if some one happens to cross their notions." He studied her a moment longer and remarked, "She is pretty — I can't find a single flaw."

Thurley was pretty that afternoon; perhaps the ooze had lent her the vivid coloring or it was her bright red coat with the great silver buttons and the ermine tam slanting down and showing her dark hair.

"I'm stupid," she began, "because I've been working so hard."

Sam settled himself on a sofa to take in the surroundings. Polly was watching something out of the window so Thurley took opportunity to remove her wraps and come to sit sedately beside the famous old man.

"But I'm not really timid," she supplemented naïvely, at which he turned about crying bravo, and threatening Hobart with losing his prima donna in order that she become Sam Sparling's leading lady.

"She's taking inventory of my wrinkles, Polly," he complained, "and my white hair and the wretched old hump o' years that has fastened itself on my back. Bring her to the Christmas matinée and let her see me in lavender-striped trousers and cutaway coat, the misunderstood young man turned from his father's mansion,

THE GRAY ANGELS

returning in the last act to his steam yacht and his second best Rolls Royce — let her have a go at me and come behind to have tea afterwards," he put his hand down and covered Thurley's — a thin, tired hand with prominent, blue veins and a handsome ring of sapphires on the little finger.

"Haven't you a good sort of leading woman?" asked Polly.

"No, the only real bond between us is a mutual love of Roquefort salad dressing," he sighed. "Her idea of art is to be undressed quite halfway down her back and to fall on my neck in limp giggles."

"Why do you have her then?" Thurley asked seriously.

"Youth, my child — she is a lovely, young thing, pink and white, straight, slim, very good to gaze upon — and she knows it. She can wear a wrap consisting of four flounces of purple chiffon and a strip of rose satin and make the audience stare at her impudent, untalented little self while they *listen* to my lines! The combination lets my wrinkles, humped back and cantankerous joints slip by unheeded. That is a penalty we pay for growing old. Never mind, Thurley, you've years in which to revel in having both talent and youth — divine combination!" Sam's bright eyes grew moody, he was remembering, as Thurley rightly guessed, the wonderful, golden years in London when he was Romeo in appearance as in voice and passion, when he was dark eyed, melancholy young Hamlet and the critics gently insinuated that as King Lear he was a trifle youngish although his makeup was superb! Those were the years when people loved his Shakespeare because his youth illumined it and he passed by with proper scorn the smart comedies requiring a morning garden backdrop, a duel in the library and

THE GRAY ANGELS

leading ladies who were possessed of more dimples than brains.

"Why don't you play old rôles?" Thurley demanded innocently, Polly smothering a giggle.

"She doesn't appreciate my romantic little heart and notions, does she? Let her see me a swashbuckling hero in hip boots and a green plumed bonnet while my black charger is led across the stage by bribes of sugar — then she'll understand."

"No, she can't understand, Sam dear, until she has reached the matronly age and still wants to do Juliet and Senta and managers try to show her the error of her ways — and figure!"

Thurley looked up at her new friend to wonder what form the ooze took with him. But he goodnaturedly patted her cheek, saying much to her relief:

"I see you are human and not going to ask me to recite 'Gunga Din.' I return the compliment by not demanding that you tear off Tosti's 'Good-by.' I only ran in to welcome you to our circle and to tell you, as senior member, a few facts about the others. They will tell you about me fast enough —"

"Never happy unless he has a breach of promise suit waiting for him in the morning's mail," promptly supplemented Polly. "Always has it rumored he is to marry a prominent whiskey dealer's widow — sells his mash notes per pound to Caleb, owns a hothouse of gardenias and has them shipped all over the map — at heart a flinty old bachelor warrior — a splendid, precious, cross pal — a jewel of an actor who makes you laugh and cry as easily as you breathe."

"There is a young woman," said Sam calmly, pointing an accusing finger, "who will never write grand opera — never! Watch how pale she grows. But she will do

THE GRAY ANGELS

something heroic, has all the salamander qualities with none of their viciousness. Would snatch a funeral wreath right off a door to make a present to some one she loved, very whippy temperament, believes that bothering over one's soul is an emotional luxury, must have had an antique little romance back somewhere. Where did you come from, Polly, anyhow? Sort of neighborhood, I fancy, where the prevailing fashion was to have your great-aunt's deceased poodles stuffed and mounted to preside over dark, chilly parlors. . . . Of course, Polly jumped the stockade and landed among us — a forlorn child with squeaky shoes, as I remember her. She's as proud as Punch and stubborn as a bull terrier, so we let her starve knowing that sometime or other she is going to bump smack into Fame and he'll never let go of her. But not grand opera, Polly girl."

"I shall stay in New York," Polly announced, fastening her coat, "and I shall write a grand opera in which Thurley shall sing. You will all have to beg my pardon." Her brown eyes showed the hurt in them and Sam Sparling began helping her with refractory buttons of her wrap.

"I'll have my apology engraved on a gold scroll and you can use it for a dinner gong — on the gong handle will be a bas relief of myself — gardenia and all. So you can beat me up thrice a day."

Thurley was laughing; she wondered if Miss Clergy had napped during the turmoil. "Don't go," she begged. "Please stay a long time."

"We can't, we've a raft of calls. I always take Polly because she can break away so neatly. I'm the sort that sits and sits, ending by halfway swallowing my cane handle and getting nowhere in particular."

"Will we really go to the matinée?" she asked Polly.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Of course. I'll call for you — and tea in Sam's dressing room. Oh, Thurley, you haven't begun to realize New York as yet — not Bliss's New York, but your New York and mine and Sam's, too."

"Why do you love it so?" asked Thurley.

Polly leaned her two by four self against a chair as she answered, "Oh, because — when I walk down the Avenue sunny mornings and see ragamuffins sharing an ice cream cone and visiting British peeresses with their fresh faces and dowdy clothes vying with our American heiresses with their smart creations and hunks of black pearls, when I come upon nice, happy boys and girls from up state or clever Middle West men here on important commissions and bronzed cowpunchers and trim naval officers, to say nothing of portly men of finance bowling along — I'm New York mad. Besides, when I have to watch the traffic cops and white baby prams becoming friendly, to gaze at a window of caramels, mountains of them, and right next to it to gaze at a window of paintings on silk guarded by the Pinkertons, when I have to stop to watch the man in Childs' turn flapjacks and know that inside Sherry's sit the prettiest, best dressed, quite the most decent men and women in the world nibbling at tomato surprise and whispering as to how many apartment houses the waiters own, when I see Pekinese spaniels airing their new jewelry and mongrels scrapping over a bone, when I can go to a ten-cent movie or sit in a box at the opera and wear Ernestine Christian's adorable brown velvet dress, when I happen upon dainty brides buying chintz remnants at Wanamaker's, spotting burglars chatting over their prospects at the Five Points a few moments later — and when I can ride home sardine fashion in a subway express or take a battered hansom what 'as seen better days, pin a bunch of

THE GRAY ANGELS

florist's seconds to my chest and drift down towards Washington Square or, once in a while, be picked up by Caleb or Collin or Ernestine and be glided home in a motor — well — I love New York," she paused out of breath.

Sam bent and kissed her. "Marry me," he demanded. Thurley was noticeably embarrassed.

Polly burst out laughing. "That's Sam's remedy for all ills, Thurley. When Ernestine had to move out of her old apartment, Sam was engaged to her until she was satisfactorily settled in her new one. It bucked her up no end."

Thurley shook her head. "I'm afraid I've not come on enough really to entertain you — do call a year from now."

Sam laid his tired hand on her head in mock solemnity. "Don't let Hobart cheat you of what you deserve — remember, every woman has the right to at least one trousseau!" After which they left, Polly calling back something as to the time of their meeting on Christmas afternoon.

Thurley stole to Miss Clergy's door but the little ghost lady was fast asleep.

"Every woman has the right to at least one trousseau," — she wished he had not said it. She did not want even deep-down, hidden regrets. . . . French exercises, Italian opera scores, singing lessons, English reading selections, dancing, fencing, horseback, social etiquette, makeup, costuming, stage directions — pretend, pretend, *pretend* things . . . and they were trimming the church at the Corners — Dan and Lorraine this year, Lorraine with her ring . . . What strange people, at odds with each other and their own selves — what queer, detached lives — what remarkable theories, fantastically ex-

THE GRAY ANGELS

pressed! where was the saneness of it, the rhythm — that was it — the rhythm? Would she experience it and be satisfied after she had made her bow to the public? Could the ooze always answer the requirements of her savage young heart?

After the Christmas *matinée*, when Thurley with eyes as large as saucers, so Polly reported, had watched Sam play a difficult rôle in superb fashion and had taken tea with him in his dressing room, she returned alone to the hotel.

Polly was due at a Greenwich Village affair, Caleb was with Collin in the country, Ernestine in Chicago practising scales, as her letter to Thurley would intimate, and at Birge's Corners . . . ah, that was the ooze, it was no longer real! So Thurley came into the dingy sitting room — at least it now seemed dingy — to find that Miss Clergy had suffered an attack of neuralgia and had been ordered off to bed. The high tea in Sam's dressing-room had robbed her of her appetite, so she did not go downstairs for dinner but changed her party frock for a schoolgirl blue serge and stoically settled herself at her books. She promised herself that after she had diligently studied she would go into the ooze and celebrate her real Christmas!

As she put her hand on the table the new bracelet Miss Clergy had given her that morning struck the wood with a metallic clink. It was a handsome thing set with diamonds, handsomer than anything Dan had afforded. But it had been given her with the generosity of a jailor in lieu of any one else's daring to give her such an article!

Thurley began an irregular verb conjugation in sing-song fashion, fighting off a savage mood. The telephone

THE GRAY ANGELS

interrupted her and half a second later she was saying in the gladdest voice she possessed:

"Tell Mr. Hobart to come right up," hanging up the receiver and running to the mirror to see just how much of a fright she looked.

She had no time to think of a change of costume for in he came, a veritable domestic gentleman muffled in an ulster, holly in his buttonhole *and* something in white tissue paper and tied with red ribbon.

"Merry Christmas! I had five minutes' extra time and I thought I'd drop in to take the chance of finding you. Had an idea you'd be in the doldrums, first Christmas out of the backyard, y'know." Unasked, he slipped off the ulster and Thurley saw he was in evening dress. "Thing at the club," he explained, noticing her expression. "Well, what have we been doing? Don't tell me that rascal of a Sam had you behind for tea."

"He did." Thurley suddenly found her old wild-rose self as she told him of the *matinée*.

When she finished he said, those curious gray eyes of his narrowing, "A good singer should have a good —" holding out the white tissue paper parcel.

"Oh, what?" she demanded. "It's the only present I've had that was done in white tissue paper. Nothing came from home and the others laugh at Christmas. Miss Clergy gave me this bracelet — but the bill was in the box," she added resentfully. "But this — this is direct from Santa Claus."

"It's a good mascot," he informed her gravely. "Always keep it to say little heathen prayers or curses to and tell it your troubles and your joys. In short, treat it like a regular fellow."

Thurley scrambled the paper and ribbon away.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Why — I bought you almost the same," she said unconsciously.

Hobart laughed. "You actually bought your stern *maestro* a present?"

Thurley was absorbed in looking at the little Buddha carved from lapis lazuli with gold for the features and diamonds for eyes. "This one is much lovelier," she said.

"Tell me — did you really buy me a present?" he demanded.

She nodded.

"Why haven't you handed it over?"

"Because — I bought presents for every one — the sort of things you people laugh at — but you seemed different from the others so I bought you a Buddha because I thought you needed some one to tell your real secrets to — and then, after I wrapped it up, I began to think you would not like it —"

"Will you get it or shall I send a court order for my property?"

Thurley vanished, reappearing with the teakwood case. "Isn't it odd that we both bought the same thing?"

Hobart's face was boyish as he took the gift. "Why, Thurley," he told her, "I believe I'm training an angel unawares."

"You mean me?" she asked humbly.

"What made you speak of telling real secrets?" he stroked the little idol as he spoke.

"I don't know — only where do the real things go to when the unreal have to come first and take up all one's time?"

Hobart started towards her; he seemed about to say something very secret. Thurley looked at him wistfully, every memory concerning the Corners, her dissatisfac-

THE GRAY ANGELS

tions and rebellions vanished. She assumed a gay, star-like mood.

But he thought better of it and became the polite and baffling Bliss Hobart with whom no one took liberties, least of all a girl protégée. It would be wiser to tell the secrets to the little Buddha whose silence was of golden quality. Perhaps, if years ago, more years ago than Thurley knew, one's secret things had not been used as public jokes. . . .

"I'm afraid I cannot answer," he said brusquely. "Leave my greetings for Miss Clergy and don't try to wear your mascot as a watchguard—happy days, tomorrow as usual." Patting her on the shoulder, he dismissed himself.

Thurley set the mascot before her books and returned to grubbing. Two hours later she glanced up and the diamond eyes gave her a jolly twinkle.

"I say," she remarked out loud, "you are first aid to the agitated! Now tell me—didn't he for just a moment treat me as if I were a real *woman*?"

So passed the first New York Christmas!

The next day, when Thurley went for her lesson, she had the pleasure of being snubbed and scolded. But passing out of the studio, she saw the little Buddha sitting on his desk very close to where his hand must reach each time he took up his pen or blotted a letter!

CHAPTER XV

Ernestine Christian did not return to town until February, having been induced to play engagements on the Pacific coast. It was the mid-winter thaw when she arrived. She telephoned Thurley almost immediately and, to Thurley's delight, asked her to come and have coffee that afternoon as it was a Sunday and lessons were not a consideration.

"Sure you won't come along?" Thurley asked Miss Clergy, dutifully, as she made ready.

"Quite sure, my dear. This wind would start every bone aching to perdition," Miss Clergy told her, "and do put on a prettier dress — there may be guests."

Thurley looked at her proverbial blue serge with hesitation. "Oh, I can't bother to be done up in a real creation — we've such loads to talk over and Ernestine's clothes are the sort one never really notices and yet, describing them as detached things, they are quite wonderful. Do you think I ought to change?" for it suggested itself to her that Bliss Hobart might drop in for greetings.

"I should. You can't be too particular, Thurley. The time is coming when the world will want to know what sort of frocks you wear every clock stroke of the day." Here Miss Clergy yawned and settled back among innumerable cushions and Thurley spied the cover of a popular novel — one of Caleb's, to make it the more amusing — peeping forth.

"Well, if I must — I must," she said, darting into her

THE GRAY ANGELS

room and donning a tea-green velour with wee fur buttons up to the arctic verge of her pink ears. She wrapped a mantle of green around herself in careless, becoming fashion, kissed Miss Clergy somewhere between the chin and forehead and left her to revel in Caleb's self-starting romance in which a homely hero was quite the mode.

She found Ernestine walking about her salon with Silver Heels perched cordially on her shoulder, purring for joy at his mistress' return. Ernestine was busy telling the maid wherein she had neglected to carry out orders and why the decorators would be recalled to make amends. There was a pettish air about her criticisms, Thurley thought, for when Thurley came in with wide opened arms, Ernestine merely gave her a shoulder pat, saying,

"Don't try to visit until I've finished my anvil chorus. On Caleb's recommendation I had a firm do things for me — gaze at the fiasco. It is terribly disquieting to leave one's place as one likes it and return to find it the back parlor of a flourishing merchant!"

"Oh, but it doesn't look so!" Thurley defended. "That fire screen is a joy."

"It may as well be put away," Ernestine told the maid. "There'll be a charity kettle-drum soon enough and I'll have to donate something for the raffle. That will do nicely. Every one wants things one has worn or used — I've a notion the next time to send my last quarter's telephone directory — I don't doubt but what it would actually be bid for . . . there, Agnes, get hold of the firm early in the morning and don't call me. You know what is wrong and I cannot personally stand a battle with interior decorators. Come inside, Thurley; take off your green riding-hood cloak and let me see you.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Ah, lovely, lovely!" she caressed the gown as Thurley would have wished to be caressed herself. "Why, you have promoted yourself famously — the hair is charming, not a hint of Birge's Corners left! Nice child, how proud we shall all be — go 'way, Silver Heels, I've a new playmate — shall we stay in my room and pray heaven no one interrupts us? I ordered black coffee and crullers so we can be extra wild. Tell me all you have seen and done."

Ernestine threw herself on a chaise longue gracefully — she had a perfect way of doing everything. Caleb had declared her to be the only woman who could really look fetching while done up in curl papers! As she lay there in her negligee of skillfully blended blue and gray chiffon without a hint of lace to relieve the sulky loveliness of the colors, Thurley experienced the same shyness she had that first day in Bliss Hobart's studio.

"Did your concerts go well?" she asked.

"Do you want these cushions piled on top of you and myself acting as paperweight on top of them?" Ernestine raised herself on one thin arm. "*Continuez!* Why not ask if unknown admirers sent me red, red roses or if I played Chaminade for the Benevolent Newsboys' Association when I was their honor guest — ask if I climbed Mt. McKinley or was lost in Death Valley — you disappointing *midge*, your looks belie you utterly."

"What is the popular topic?" Thurley was capable of teasing, too. "Caleb Patmore?"

Ernestine's sallow cheeks flushed. She made a clucking noise which brought Silver Heels from under the lounge. "I hope you eat so many frosted crullers you'll take on weight, bringing Bliss's wrath on your impudent shoulders. I want to know about you — whom have you met? — how is the ghost-lady? — the voice of gold —

THE GRAY ANGELS

what do you think of us now? Sorry you came?" She laughed over at Thurley in friendly fashion and the fagged artist vanished.

So Thurley, while February slush-rain beat in vain at windows and raw winds mercilessly blew, told Ernestine all that had happened from the time they said good-by in December.

"I did hate you when you wrote so about Christmas. That wasn't fair. Why couldn't you have let me have that last bromidic holiday?"

"My child, I cannot endure Christmas and birthday things. I can stand Valentine's Day much easier. I don't know—but I'm so weary playing holiday matinées and having the audience one glitter of new watches, bracelets and other trifling remembrances, of having their minds groggy from too much dinner and demanding me to play carols with tumity-tum tunes while my piano must be holly decorated. Rather prejudiced me. And birthdays are devil days since they remind me I never wanted to be born, yet some unknown law of rhythm would have it so. Here I am, earthbound in a sallow, fleshy envelope when I'd love to be cloud free to drift here, there, without restraint, creed, convention—or the greed for crullers," helping herself to a second. "Perhaps it was rough on a new little beggar, smashing up her bandbox ideas. Never mind, I thought of you—run open the second drawer of that white chest and find the jeweller's box—it is for you. See if you like it."

Thurley obeyed, coming back to her chair to examine the box. "How good you are!" she said, as she came upon a little blue leather and gold faced clock not much bigger than a revenue stamp.

"A practice clock when you go on deadly tours.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Tuck it in your bag as a memento and years hence you can say, 'Ernestine Christian — rest her bones for they seldom rested when I knew her — gave it to me in my salad days.' One can always use such trifles. That reminds me, I have a beaver jacket Polly may be induced to accept; write 'Polly — jacket' on that pad so I'll remember. I'll hunt her up to-morrow. Caleb says she has been doing supe work in the movies; tough luck for any one but Polly. But I've no doubt she fancies it gains inspiration for her for the America opera.

"So! Bliss says a nice word occasionally and you like Sam Sparling — one of God's own, Thurley — now *he* believes in Santa Claus. And you think Collin Patmore's pictures superb? Wait until you see his house — Parva Sed Apta he has named it — and his garden! There is a fierce rivalry between Collin's garden and Caleb's and likewise their houses. Collin dubs his a *château* and I think Caleb claims his is a really true lodge! Funny boys! We'll go up there in the summer and see for ourselves. Oh, yes, Thurley, tell me about Miss Clergy! I want to ask her if I may take you abroad this summer; three months across would do wonders for you. Bliss mentioned it before I went away. I want to see your eyes the first time you gaze at the Alhambra in the moonlight. We'll give Italy half our time, a few weeks in Paris and six days in London. You'll return not knowing yourself."

"But the money? When, oh, when can I earn?" Thurley asked in distress.

"Don't bother about money; just let me tell you what to pack and what to leave behind. Collin goes to sketch near Barcelona and we may take the same steamer over — wouldn't that be a lark? Collin is the nicest courier I know, besides being the greatest portrait painter. I

THE GRAY ANGELS

suppose he will give his next season's subjects Spanish coloring and a red rose just tumbling off their left ear à la Carmen. One year he did Russia and I vow every western society woman he painted had the mysterious air of stilettos concealed in fans and poisoned cigarettes that Moscow alone can impart. He'll run out of countries by and by, as France, Italy and England are old stories."

"Can't he paint people just as they are?"

"That's the trouble. He would if he was not careful to have a supply of 'atmosphere' to shoot into muddy complexions and wriggling noses and to blur softly over deep-seated moles and other excess facial baggage. I am the only woman he ever painted without thought for future commissions."

"Did he ever paint Mr. Hobart?" she wondered if she betrayed a blush.

"Haven't you seen? But, then, you've never been at Parva Sed Apta. It was Bliss's portrait that gave Colin his sudden rise. When you look at it, you will understand." Ernestine fell to telling of Sam Sparling's early stage days and her own début when she actually had worn white net with pearls, following by a dissertation on Polly's angelic stubbornness and hopelessness and on how she planned to snub Caleb if he wrote a sequel to "Victorious Victoria" and advice about the attitude Thurley had best take towards her future associates at the opera house.

"Won't we be terribly intimate?" she asked in surprise.

"Dear, no! Oh, you'll have pictures taken together in loving attitudes, go to parties and all that — send each other flowers at proper times. But you'll never be like the 'family' towards each other and, when you are

THE GRAY ANGELS

older, you will realize the singular honor it has been to become one of the family so readily. You may loathe the tenor who sings *Romeo* to your *Juliet* and the woman who is leading contralto may be a deadly enemy — but that matters nothing. You sing your rôle and leave it and your art personality behind in your dressing-room. You will find that the others also have their own affairs, interests and opinions. They are not keen for the advent of a new, charming *diva* of whom they are certain to be jealous and angry of success so swiftly, easily achieved. You are a musical phenomenon, Thurley, and, as there are not many in any one generation, you must be guided accordingly."

"Please tell me how the 'family' started." Thurley had not yet reached the stage where talking of herself and her accomplishments was of keen interest.

"It was Bliss's idea," Ernestine paused as if undecided how much to tell. "He is a rare soul — the jewel in the toad's head, we call him. But he wears an armor of worldly practicability and cynicism; he must be very sure of one before he lets one know the real man. . . . Some years ago, when his opinions were just beginning to find favor, he met Sam Sparling and they had a fearful row — terrific — Sam said Bliss Hobart was all sorts of a fool and, after they had it out, they found that each meant the same thing when you sifted it down to the makings. So they were comrades. They were together quite a lot because Sam had him put on plays and then Sam went to London and Bliss into the opera and music field." Here she paused again. "Anyway, they had really started the family — and when Bliss had a letter from Sam about Collin Hedley, an American starving in London, whom Sam was sending back to New York to paint Bliss's portrait, he prepared to welcome this Collin

THE GRAY ANGELS

as a brother, and so he did. The great picture was painted and Collin was made. Now Collin and Caleb came from the same little Middle West town and, lo and behold, up turns Caleb fresh from a fifteen-dollar-a-week newspaper job and keen as mustard for writing 'big stuff.' Inspired by Bliss's picture and by Bliss and the whole outlay of atmosphere into which they led him, Caleb wrote his first best seller — it had heart in it, too — and although Bliss and Collin wanted to duck him in the rain barrel for degrading his talent, they loved him for himself and he joined them. Then, enter Ernestine Christian! Now this was funny — I was playing London concerts then and I met Sam: he recited at a royal benefit at which I played. We sat out between the numbers talking about 'what I like to eat' and 'what you like to eat' and 'what color you like best' and 'what color I like best' and so on, you know, the usual procedure. And when I sailed for America I had a letter of introduction to the trio —"

Thurley finished the confession. "Then they all met and loved you in different ways."

"Tell me how?"

"Bliss as a comrade and Collin as a big sister and Caleb as a real man loves a real woman."

"You've grown up, Thurley," was Ernestine's comment. "But I must tell you that little Polly was added quite unexpectedly. She was posing as a sprite for Collin; you know Collin does children's portraits with pastel backgrounds of favorite fairy tales, half indistinct — very good idea and quite the rage. Polly is an ideal sprite, brownie or gnome model and Collin had run across her by accident. The first morning she posed she fainted dead away — slam bang — on the floor, and it was a real faint because she hadn't had a square meal in two days,

THE GRAY ANGELS

just samples of cereals and Hudson River elixir. They discovered her fierce pride and her tragic ambition and her adorable self, so she has been our Polly ever since —”

“Loving Collin —”

“Loving Collin, woman of the world,” repeated Ernestine. “Then Polly blew in one night in her audacious fashion accompanied by Mark Wirth. Now we had seen Mark dance and enjoyed him but knew him to be a will o’ the wisp person and Lissa Dagmar, who I hope stays in Paris for all time, had bewitched him and we really don’t approve of that kind of thing. Mark, however, was like the foundling in a basket, crying feebly during the stormy night, and we just could not turn him away although Lissa tried her best to make inroads into our ‘family.’ She cried and bribed and writhed because she still remained aloof from the charmed circle. And we kept Mark and made him one of us, scolding him roundly every chance we had.”

“And now I am the infant,” said Thurley slowly, “but why don’t you like Madame Dagmar?” recalling the purring voice she had once heard.

“She is impossible — a large person dressed fantastically in sort of medieval patterns; she has Titian hair and serpent green eyes, those heavy, white lids in which purplish veins spread in profusion, and a wretched voice with the unexplained phenomenon of being able to reach a tip-top note far above the range of any other soprano in the world. This one note is as soft and clear as if it were heaven-sent. It has made her a name and a fortune, the one divine sound coming as a reward for poor technique and wobbly trills. She tried opera, failed miserably, and does concert tours where people crowd to see her gowns and wait for that tree-top call. The rest

THE GRAY ANGELS

of the time she gives singing lessons. We call her the 'Voice Assassin,' and Bliss Hobart threatens to appeal to the authorities if she does not take down her shingle. Ten dollars for twenty minutes and nothing of value to the pupil save seeing and hearing what is wisest to avoid! However, like many impossible persons, she has a following, a personality — a — a — way with her. She will pet and coo over you, if Mark does not, and you had best be outwardly polite; it is wisest thus, paying no heed to her since Lissa proceeds on the principle of 'what he thought he might require, he went and took the same as me.' To Lissa playfulness always means experience, although the other fellow may not know it! And then —"

"Madame Dagmar, Mr. Mark Wirth," the maid announced.

Ernestine sank back among the cushions, groaning. "I cannot be a low order of animal life and refuse to see her — she has just returned from Paris, I presume . . . oh, Thurley, help me up! Say we'll be in," she told the maid, staggering to her feet with an exaggerated gesture.

Surpressing a very genuine giggle, Thurley followed Ernestine into the drawing room where they met an effusive person wearing a hat which expressed all the best ideas of the Wright brothers and a gown of shimmering mauve with gaudy peacock embroideries.

"My sweet children," Lissa began in her cloying voice, "to think I find you both here . . . and this is Thurley? What a dear! I know all about you, because Mr. Hobart speaks of no one else with the same enthusiasm. Of course I never hope to be called in as a consulting teacher — dear no," here she gave a snarly little laugh, "I'm considered a real villainness by certain persons. But I shall be fairy godmother anyway

THE GRAY ANGELS

— there always is an unmasked fairy at the christening, you remember! This is Mark Wirth —” a sweep of her white, jewelled hand intimated the handsome chap with burnished gold hair and eyes as blue as Thurley’s. Two things about Mark saved him from being merely an Adonis — his long forehead, the forehead of a man who often complains of being persecuted because of his tenacity to prove his point, and the astute expression of his eyes.

“Sit down, every one. I am just back from tour myself — well, what are your hopes and fears?”

Ernestine let Lissa take the center of the stage.

“Mark isn’t going on tour, I can’t spare him,” here another snarly laugh. Thurley fancied Mark Wirth flushed with annoyance.

“Oh, Mark, when you have such bully chances!” Ernestine protested.

“I can stay in town as well — do let’s talk of some one else,” he said.

“I want Mark to stop Grecian dancing, there is no definite future in it now débutantes have taken it up” — her artificially shaped eyebrows lifting as a danger signal — “and make a specialty of ballroom dancing —”

Ernestine held up her hand. “God forbid,” she said reverently. “I saw Mark dance in the Harvard Stadium — please let him continue to use his brains as well as his feet.”

“There’s room for a difference of opinion. For myself, my classes promise to be large this season — and I’ve wonderful frocks. I’ve reopened the Hotel Particular and tried to get Collin or Caleb on the ’phone but their men say they are not about. I only saw Bliss by accident,” she gave a side glance at Thurley, “it was then I learned about you!”

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Is the Hotel Particular as smart as ever?" Ernestine hastened to ask.

"I've had no end of things done to it. Come and see. Which you never do. Isn't it strange, Miss Precore, I pay five calls to this person's begrudged one?" and Lissa smiled in her most disagreeable fashion.

Ernestine tried to smooth over the accusation by praising Lissa's frock.

"Mark played rouge-et-noir at Monte Carlo and I won a winter's wardrobe," Lissa boasted.

Ernestine rose and ordered fresh coffee. She was embarrassed that Thurley must meet the first real scandal in her house, not but what she would and must meet many such and not that it shocked Ernestine for she had always been indifferent to such situations. But latent motherhood pricked through the armor of indifference. She began in an extremely spirited manner to talk of things to which the answers could be anything but personal. She directly engaged Lissa in conversation, leaving Mark free to drift over towards Thurley. Within a few moments they began laughing over some nonsense, to Lissa's annoyance, in the same spirit with which Thurley and Dan had one time laughed—at least two lifetimes ago!

Mark sat on a straddle chair before her to admire her wild-rose coloring, contrasting it with Lissa's well rouged cheek. He liked Thurley's green frock which brought out the whiteness of her skin and the glorious, deep sea eyes, purple in the winter's afternoon light. Presently this embryo prima donna and the famous dancer, who for the time being mistook shadow for substance, found themselves discussing juvenile sports which both really had rebelled at leaving behind.

"You skate? So do I—let's go incog—I'll wear

THE GRAY ANGELS

a mustache — there is certain to be a crowd if we're known," Lissa heard Mark saying.

". . . and in summer I can play five sets of tennis — and dance half the night," Thurley made answer.

"Splendid — Collin has a wonderful court, I want to take you up there —"

Lissa's pink lips were thin and shrewd. "Come, dear," she said to Mark in her softest voice, "the little girl will be hoarse to-morrow if you keep her chattering like a magpie."

And Thurley, as Ernestine told Hobart afterwards, sank in her first feminine harpoon! She rose as obediently as if she were but half her age, saying,

"We can plan about it later, your *aunt* is calling you!"

After which Lissa, snarls and purrs all in one, and Mark more confused and brief in his farewells than Ernestine had ever seen him, made an inharmonious exit. And Ernestine kissed Thurley and twirled her about, saying, "Oh beautiful — beautiful — *beautiful!*"

CHAPTER XVI

Like all clever women who have met defeat often enough to escape it in the future, Lissa realized the best way to vanquish an enemy was to know her intimately. Therefore, she invited Thurley to dinner at the Hotel Particular. The pink card looked very innocent as Thurley read in Lissa's exaggerated handwriting,

"I've asked no one else, dear child, because I want really to know you. And I shall not take no for an answer — I'll come and get you if you don't appear at the stroke of seven."

Thurley showed the card to Bliss Hobart before they began their lesson, watching his brows draw together in quick alarm and then lift cynically. He threw it aside with an annoyed gesture.

"I don't like Lissa's trying to bag my game, but you'll have to go, I suppose, and be done with it. Please don't absorb any of her silly notions. You've been brought up so far as any nice child would be and you are not spoiled. You could be very easily spoiled, Thurley, and a frightful person if you were. Some persons have single- and some multiple-compartment minds. That is why a single-compartment-minded person may have a tragic experience and it proves the end of him, whereas a multiple-compartment-minded person emerges unscathed, to all appearances, only a part of him harmed. The single-compartment-minded person can comprehend but one viewpoint, good or bad, one aim, believe in but one result — if it is good, all is well — if it is bad —

THE GRAY ANGELS

disaster, hopeless and lasting. You have forgotten Birge's Corners too quickly, Thurley, to make me fear you are of the single-compartment variety. But, please, take everything Lissa says with a large punctuation of mental salt and try to wastebasket her entire influence."

Thurley laughed. "What I planned to do, for I do not like her and I do like Mark Wirth. Yet she interests me. Besides, I must know some bad people!"

Hobart shook his head. "If only you never need to — heigho, here we go, talking against time —"

"Tell me, does Mark Wirth really love her?" Thurley insisted. She had grown to feel more at home with Hobart than she had fancied could occur; even during his abrupt, aloof moments she sensed the gentler part of him as being merely sidetracked for the time being.

"Mark," said Hobart as he sat at the piano, "is a case of the old warning, 'Vices first abhorred, next endured, last embraced.' That is why I beg you to make your visits to the Hotel Particular far between and few."

"But sometime he will love some one and then he'll find himself," Thurley concluded. "Can he go on dancing attendance on a silly old woman who wants him to sacrifice his art to be a professional ballroom dancer?"

"You are here for a singing lesson," Hobart tried to argue, "but, as you are on the subject, suppose you suggest that thought to Mark, if you ever have a moment alone with him. Don't tell him if there is a door ajar — unless you look into the next room first. Lissa is the eternal vigilante when it comes to Mark. Bah, it is all bad tasting, let's sing some ballads to get the very idea out of our heads." He began, "Hark, hark, the lark" which Thurley sang — and as she sang it to him, she did it exquisitely.

THE GRAY ANGELS

As she finished, he asked, "You and Lady Sensible are good pals, are you not?"

"You mean Ernestine? Oh, yes, I love her," Thurley began rapturously, "even when she is at her meanest."

"Bravo! I will tell you something. Lady Sensible is a great artist, none greater in her way, but if she would buy Christmas presents for cross singing teachers and halfway cry when she thought cross teachers had bought nothing for her, if she would be unbecomingly rosy when she took tea with a certain old actor and jump right up and down and say, 'Oh — Oh!' when she saw Collin's latest portrait, also sitting up half the night to read that rascal Caleb's latest novel, although she knows it to be worthless — I think Lady Sensible could play lullabies that would give women the patience of eternity and girls the thrill of expectant motherhood and inspire men on to the heights. Don't tell her I say this for I have already tried to argue it out with her, but she fights me back with her desiccated logic! But, Thurley, do you keep your childish appreciation of things and that adorable intuition — then all the world will go a-hunting laurel wreaths for you!"

He bent and kissed her forehead, pushing her away from him and concluding, "Off with you — I warrant you haven't opened a French book to-day. And you have actually made me sentimental! But when you are both a real artist and a real girl, I shall tell you a wonderful secret — now, am I such a tyrant?" He waved his hand at her until she unwillingly disappeared.

Outside the door Thurley began to smile and the secretary and stenographer caught its contagion and smiled at each other as Thurley passed ahead. The elevator man and the doorman both felt unquestionably chirked up as

THE GRAY ANGELS

she gazed at them. Every regret or loneliness or jealous thought concerning the Corners had vanished. She felt sacred, set apart from every one and she would only share the reason with a lapis lazuli idol with a painted gold mouth and very twinkling diamond eyes!

Thurley's visit to the Hotel Particular, Lissa's box of a place, left her with the belief there never was any end to surprises. She had worn a white silk dress, falling straight from the shoulders, flattering herself that for a dinner with a middle-aged singing teacher she was properly costumed.

But when she came into the house, she saw her error. For here she encountered elegance at home. The drawing-room had the intimate charm of a French salon with its old ivory and dull blue brocaded hangings. The furniture was painted peacock blue and covered with rose taffeta with a silver sheen and a solemn, stuffed parrot on a gaily painted stand looked at her in cynical amusement.

All about the room, which was oppressively perfumed as well, were numerous photographs of Lissa taken at various ages and of handsome men, young, old, middle-aged and all of them autographed with superlative sentiments to, "Lissa Dearest" or "Dear Girl Lissa" or "Adorable Madame Dagmar"! During her moment of waiting Thurley tiptoed about to read the inscriptions.

There were several of Mark of decidedly more recent date, some in his dancing attire and others in evening dress; these were inscribed, "To Lissa, Best Pal Ever," and in corresponding vein and as Thurley's blue eyes stared at the firm writing, she wondered if it was right for a man with such a mind as Mark's merely to dance

THE GRAY ANGELS

through life and leave a trail of battered hearts behind him!

There was a lack of books in the room or trifles indicating pronounced tastes in any subject. The truth was that the only battles of life which Lissa considered were worth fighting were those against her double chin and, beyond handsome editions bound to match handsome sofa pillows, she gave no thought to the printed page.

Even the piano seemed displeasing in its peacock blue frame with leopard skin rugs spread fantastically before the blue and gold bench. Thurley read the titles of the music on the rack. She had a suspicion she would find cloying, East Indian love songs or French chansons with small *raison d'être*, and she was smiling at having been so utterly correct when Lissa swept into the room in a striking cherry red velvet with a complete armor of jet jewelry, saying in affected fashion,

"What is the little one thinking about? Do you like those songs? Or don't they let you have a go at them? I imagine your layout is as heavy as a boiled English pudding!"

Rather confused, Thurley nodded.

"How larky to have you alone! I suppose you had to steal away to me." She stroked Thurley's cheek and the girl winced under the soft, sure touch, too practised, suggestive of a claw beneath the velvety fingers.

"It is so pleasant to come, Madame Dagmar —"

"Madame? Lissa! I insist! Why, I'm not your grandmother, silly sweet, years do not matter in our world! What have those disgruntled persons tried to tell you?"

A gong sounded the dinner hour and Lissa led her into a fantastic dining-room where a table groaned under unwholesome goodies.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Don't mention banting," Lissa said, sitting down unceremoniously, reaching for anchovies and caviar. "I adore eating. I don't believe in denying oneself any of the good things of life. Come, Thurley, pretend you are at home, wherever that is, and have a schoolgirl feast of it. The desserts will be poor because cook is so involved in a breach of promise suit." With small regard for etiquette, Lissa was "wading in," as Dan Birge would have said.

Thurley contrasted it with the "family" dinner parties where food was merely the medium of their getting together; where every one talked first and ate last. Not so with Lissa; she had a quick, untidy way of swallowing her food and talking while she did so; she spotted her bodice in revolting fashion, dabbing at the stain with her napkin and saying she ought to be sent to bed!

In fact, Lissa had little time to talk to Thurley until the café noir was served in the salon. Then, uncomfortable from the six-course dinner to which she had done full justice, now dipping into a box of puffy chocolates with nut centers and taking absinthe with practised sips, she turned her rather fleshy face towards Thurley and remarked,

"You know, the only way I remember places in Europe is by the things we had to eat at them! Take Stratford-on-Avon, for instance, I always appear animated when it is mentioned, but not because of the Hathaway woman or Bill Shakespeare, but the wonderful gooseberry tarts . . . then Rome—what cheese! And Moscow—with its caviar and cordials—and Amsterdam with boiled beef and a delectable shrimp sauce," she halfway closed her eyes as she sipped the rest of her absinthe and rebuked Thurley for refusing it.

"Perhaps you smoke?" she suggested. "My throat

THE GRAY ANGELS

won't stand for it and I take sweets as a consolation."

"No, thank you — at least not yet." Thurley wondered if she would ever cease meeting famous persons and going to wonderful houses where she had an entirely new scheme of life handed to her stamped with a seal of approval!

"Do have a chocolate," Lissa pressed them on Thurley. She had a sort of, "May I — oh, *may* I?" air which Dickens' Mr. Pumblechook possessed when asking for the pleasure of merely shaking hands.

Thurley took one but laid it aside. "Mr. Hobart forbids it," she said.

Lissa made a little moue. "The world does not obey Bliss Hobart, even if it does consult him. For my part, we are cordial enemies, both knowing the other's weak points. After all, Bliss was never cut out for anything more extraordinary than a first husband. But of course he will never marry," the green eyes watching Thurley carefully.

"Why not?" Thurley was unconscious of her betrayal.

Lissa gave a contented purr; she would have something to tell Mark! "Because, although no one really knows much about it, he disappears very mysteriously every summer for weeks at a time. He cannot be reached by letter or telegraph, I've heard, and of course, in this day and age, as in any other, he does not go alone."

"Not — not that sort of thing," Thurley was too angry to conceal the fact.

"Why not? Every one knows that Bliss Hobart, whose mother was an Italian and father an American, was born and brought up in Italy where he acquired the romantic tendencies of that land. Some say he sang well when he was twenty, but something happened and

THE GRAY ANGELS

he had a fever which took his voice and turned his hair gray and then he came to America where he has been a clever but presuming person with the aroma of mystery to make him all the more enticing. You will find out, Thurley; wait until he vanishes around the first of June."

"Of course the family knows where he goes." Thurley spoke the name before she thought; it brought sharp, black lights into the green eyes.

"That ridiculous family, so reserved and exclusive, they bore me! Well, not even being the family skeleton, I can't say, but I fancy they know little. Now you take such a conceited, haughty person as Ernestine Christian or that stupid Caleb or Collin with his childish, impossible manners or that queer little wisp — Polly something —"

"But you forget I am the baby of the family," Thurley reminded.

"A thousand pardons. My dear, I did not mean to offend. Of course I have my own circle, too. I am welcome in the best homes in France and England and I am always being taken for a marquise. I have my own theories about art and quite as much of a clientele as these fossils you have been bundled into without a warning. Don't let them monopolize you with their nunish, strange ideas — so utterly loveless —"

"But I have promised never to marry," Thurley interrupted.

Lissa laughed. "Artists seldom have the hen spirit! For myself, I am always more interested in a second wedding than a first, and if the first is only to tell you what to avoid in the second, why have the first?"

"But —" began Thurley rather helplessly.

"For a second wedding I always see myself in a gown

THE GRAY ANGELS

of gold brocade and a blond veil, both guiltless of trimming." Lissa's eyes strayed toward a photograph of Mark which stood on a nearby gilt table.

"But — it isn't right, you know, to —" Thurley was naught but a huge gaucherie.

Lissa threw back her head to laugh, her plump white chin quivering after the soft sound ceased. Absinthe brought about freedom of speech — and liberty for all! "A fig for man-made laws! Don't you know laws are made for the mass? Are you one of them? You know you are not or you would not have a fairybook life, coming to New York to be trained by Bliss Hobart! You may not know it as well as I, but I tell you this much — I would not ask you to dinner if you were merely one of the mass. Count me snobbish, if you like, you'll be the same. None of us have time for any one who does not make it worth our while. I was careful to find out about you before I wrote you the note — and when you are very famous, perhaps you'll write a 'recommend' card for me or let me polish off a song or two; even Bliss admits I can coach!"

She went to a table to find an album, beckoning to Thurley to join her. "See — here and here — and this one — aren't they as famous as your family? Look at this photo and that autograph, well, what did I tell you? Don't become lop-sided, Thurley, or change into a crabbed spinster. Live and let love come to you — you are a genius, a super-creature — you have the right to love as you please!"

"You do believe so?" Thurley fairly whispered the words. She fancied she had so stolidly locked away love from her wild-rose heart!

"I know so! The greatest artists have always been exceptions to the rule, never meek slaves of the law."

THE GRAY ANGELS

In a clever, vivacious manner, Lissa proceeded to tell risqué stories of this actor and that singer, the pianist who loved and hated all in a month and loved and hated again before another fortnight passed, the artist's model who became morganatic queen of a small Balkan kingdom and threw aside her rank to join her worthless, gypsy lover, dancers who did so and so, the poet and novelist who had never spoken the word constancy and whose works the humdrum, constant world accepted with reverent unquestioning!

As she stood there in her flaring red velvet gown, the clever lamp-light showing the beauty of her hair, perfume addling Thurley's brain, the purring, soft voice never ceasing and the green eyes smiling fixedly, Thurley began to wonder if it would not be well to be friends with Lissa, despite Hobart and Ernestine, to know the other side of the art world — all its phases and possibilities — for had she not a multiple-compartment mind?

After a little, Lissa drew her to her and they walked to a tête-à-tête and sat there, Lissa drinking absinthe and Thurley hearing more strange, wicked but fascinating things all of which might become realities for herself and still keep the letter of her vow to Abigail Clergy.

"The greater the artist the more unmoral he must be, not immoral, that is for the commoner — but unmoral — morals do not matter. Art is a question of light and shade, ability, press agents — so on. An artist cannot achieve if hampered by petty, binding laws and paltry promises; he must have freedom of thought and action, see — I make no pretense, Thurley, of being a Victorian matron," she pointed to the rows of photographs all of which were of men.

"I am Lissa Dagmar and society knows and values me because I dare to be what I am. Society sends me

THE GRAY ANGELS

its most precious débutantes to take lessons — and some day, you, too, Thurley, will laugh as I do at these fragile ideals the world weaves about us people who do things. The people *who have things to do* may be nuns and monks and model married couples, but those *who do things* — wait, wait until you meet your opera associates — *où, la-la,*” she broke into a French street song ending with an unexpectedly high note which thrilled Thurley’s whole being.

“Oh, Lissa Dagmar,” she said, as fascinated as a country lad with the fair snake charmer, “let me come to see you again —”

Lissa leaned back in contentment. She had thrown the spell as she planned — since she had not forgotten that Thurley had called her Mark Wirth’s aunt! She was telling more of her scheme of things when Mark himself dropped in and was, for once, an unwanted guest.

“I’m awfully glad to see you,” he told Thurley. “Hobart said you would be here — so I came.” He avoided Lissa’s eyes. “He said I must bring you home because he does not like stray cab drivers and he says you’ve no car of your own. I say, Lissa, I’ve got the coast engagement and if I have my company ready by the first of April, we’ll be on our way.”

Lissa mumbled a response. Mark was looking at Thurley’s half flushed cheeks and startled eyes, the prim white gown cut high in the neck — a contrast to Lissa’s sumptuous red velvet which revealed a fifth vertebra!

“Oh, do take me home. I’ve heard such a world of new things and eaten such a goody shop that I’ll have hard work to be of any use to-morrow!” It was a relief to have Mark appear; there was a hint of the boy Dan in his manner and his handsome self hovering

THE GRAY ANGELS

about her. She looked at Lissa and enjoyed her discomfiture, wondering if when she had dissected her theories she would still believe in them or if there were not something of the sorceress about Lissa with her purring voice and velvet-like hands. Then, realizing that Mark was one of Lissa's "pet robins," as she named him, that he — all the oldtime horror which the Corners had bestowed upon its "nice" girls rushed over her and she grew monosyllabic and preoccupied as she made ready to accept his escort.

Lissa kissed her good-night and added, "Drop in on your way home, Mark, I've something to tell you."

"Oh, you want to see me to-night?" His voice was rather lack-lustre.

As the cab rolled off in the night, Lissa standing at the glass doors, a striking figure in her crimson gown, Mark said anxiously,

"What did you talk about? Lissa's such a rattlebox when she has had absinthe!"

Thurley answered coldly, "Art," after which Mark tried to explain his coming tour but it brought no response from Thurley. She was trying to decide three things all at once.

Did she or did she not believe Lissa's theories? Should she have a contempt for Mark who evidently did coincide with them or should she, womanlike, flirt with him since he seemed most willing? Lastly, where did Bliss Hobart go to of a summer? Perhaps green lights showed in Thurley's eyes as well.

But she would have been still more disillusioned had she seen Mark an hour later returning to the Hotel Particular and finding an enraged, ugly woman, harsh-voiced, red-faced, clad in a pink chiffon negligee with hideous flounces.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You needn't think she'll look at you," she began accusingly, pounding her heavy fists on the table. "She is Hobart's prize and he is no saint, even if he does have his playtime where the neighbors can't see him! How dare you come in here and take her home — an insult to me," letting rage carry her to the top notch of unreason and unrestraint while Mark, sullen yet anxious to appease, was forced to watch the entire procedure. Presently he found opportunity to reply,

"I say, don't tear it off rough! Have I neglected you or done anything without your approval? I've held up my best work to please you, because you want to stick in New York where you have a drag. Don't you think that is something? But I'll do the coast thing if it means a break," a determined look replacing the anxious expression.

Lissa's eyes narrowed. She saw she had overreached herself. Cleverly, she began a retreat. "Mark dear, I'm jealous! I'm not a nice young thing like Thurley — and you were a naughty bear to drop in and take her home — leave poor Lissa all alone. Please, honey, kiss me; say you love me; you won't go 'way out to the coast. I won't let you. Remember all I've given up for you," pointing at the photograph of an elderly, well known man of finance. "I must have love, Mark, and loyalty — such as I give the one I love."

"Yes, but not servility — not crushing every bit of originality and decency from a chap — that girl's eyes look you through!"

"Where would you have been if not for me?" Lissa was holding him half by force. "Who helped you when you had the fever? Who introduced you to Newport, who —"

Mark threw off her arm roughly. "Stop! Some-

THE GRAY ANGELS

times I wish you'd let me find my own gait in my own way — maybe it wouldn't be dancing —"

Lissa burst into effective sobs. "Don't say you want to be a horrid old lawyer or sawbones! Why is it so many wonderful men have loved me, yet I give my heart to a sulky boy that cannot appreciate what it means — why is it?" she demanded of the empty absinthe glass.

Mark almost laughed. "I'll play fair," he said doggedly, "but I do the coast tour in April."

"You'll grow away from me —"

"Which might be a good thing. I thought you didn't want constancy, did you tell Thurley so — try to make her see your death-in-life stuff?"

"You've been drinking!"

"No, you've been drinking and I've been thinking. You know, Lissa, it's well enough to play off a few weeks of nonsense abroad; something about Monaco and Florence get into your blood. But, after all, a fellow must think ahead and so ought a woman. I want to be the soap-and-water-washed sort I was. Makes me wish I hadn't danced a step — had a hammer-toe or a club-foot so I couldn't!"

"You've been talking to Bliss," she said sharply.

"He does jerk me up now and then."

Lissa threw back her head and closed her eyes. "Have I wasted the finest love of my life on a cad?" she asked of some unseen presence. "Have I told my secrets, the secrets of my inner shrine —"

"Not inner shrine," Mark could not refrain from adding, "inner shrink!"

Lissa sprang to her feet. "You young idiot," she said between set teeth, "you know I'll not let you go until I'm ready to — I never do — I'll show the whole pack of prudes that I can beat their game —"

THE GRAY ANGELS

Then the cad in the boy, which is in every boy, came to the surface and battled for supremacy in his handsome face right and wrong; he smiled in smug fashion symbolic of the fact that he had passed up the struggle.

"Maybe I've just wanted to see how you cared," he suggested. "Got any more of that stuff to drink?" He sat on the tête-à-tête and, waiting until she poured it out, let him celebrate the defeat of his better half. "My word, Thurley has a long road to go!"

CHAPTER XVII

Thurley did not see much of Lissa or Mark for the next few weeks. Perhaps Lissa deemed it wiser not to encourage Thurley's becoming one of her protégées because of Mark,—at least, until Thurley was a prima donna and her mind busied with many things. At the present time Thurley was amenable to all new faces and suggestions. Had she permitted her to be more with Mark than was customary who knows but what the result would spell disaster for Lissa's contentment. Let Thurley taste of fame as Lissa had, for a short time, tasted, and she knew no mere individuals could claim her attention as they might now.

Neither did Thurley see Sam Sparling nor Ernestine for they were on tour. Sam sent her a doll, a wonderful, fluffy-skirted young lady doll with her brown hair combed modishly, bits of kid gloves reaching to the dimpled, wax elbows and a paste brilliant necklace. The accompanying card read, "Thurley Precore, prima donna, from an old beau!" And when Thurley audaciously took the doll to Hobart's studio the next lesson hour, Hobart pretended to give the lesson to the doll and not Thurley, saying in conclusion,

"As no one else is here, Thurley, I can lecture you all I like and say what I really think — how charming you look in that costume — but please don't listen to Lissa's nonsense, you'll hear enough of it presently. Kid gloves, too! I declare if Sam hasn't lost his old heart —"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Why not listen to Lissa?" asked Thurley, imitating a doll's shrill voice.

"Because you must choose the straight, narrow path of hard work and a terrific loneliness of soul if your success is to be lasting and independent of others. You may bestow your affections on some one as a gracious favor — after you have made for yourself your public place — but never listen to what such women as Lissa chatter about — or such women as you will meet in the opera house. You will see them come and go, quickly appearing and more rapidly disappearing and that is because they have followed Lissa's logic."

"But please," still imitating the doll's voice, "what in the world am I to do? I've promised never to marry any one and I'm sure I won't love any one I cannot marry. I'm not keen on slum work and I don't choose cigarettes and Persian kitties for my home atmosphere as Ernestine does — nor attics like Polly."

Hobart's face was grave. "Some day, we will talk about things and I will tell my secrets — but not yet, you are too young and flushed with dreams." He stopped speaking to the doll as he added, "You must tramp abroad with Ernestine this summer; Miss Clergy may go or not as she wishes. But when you return you are to start rehearsals for your début."

Thurley looked at him for a long, glorious moment. After all, it had been worth the winter's work and bewildering experiences. To make her début — would she ever forget the day in the stableyard of the Hotel Button when Dan engaged her to sing at his circus, rival to the "great swinging man" — and she had told him then that some day she was to sing before great audiences — maybe earning as much as a dollar a night!

"I'm not ready," she began.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You will be — stage directions, a good maid, a press agent, Santoza's coaching and a little polishing here and there. I told you the first day you sang for me that God had taught you how to sing, man merely teaching you what."

"Abroad — London — Paris — Spain —" Thurley began to whisper. "It's true—isn't it? — say that it is —," dancing up to him, her eyes like stars.

"Don't be too happy," he suggested almost testily, "I can't bear to see it!"

"Why not?" she was the aggrieved, wild-rose child speaking her mind regardless of the person who was listening. "Because *you* are not happy?"

"No, because you must find out sooner or later that each life is given so much happiness, pain, cowardice, bravery, all attributes and emotions, the same as we are physically endowed with so much eyesight, hearing, power of locomotion, and when you realize that and know that when you burn up all the joy and ecstasy of unthinking youth, there is nothing, nothing that can ever cause such joy to exist again or give one such an abandon of mirth — all the rest of life snails on in gray patterns — I'd like to have you save your joy for things more worth while than this, distribute it so it will last through the gray days, Thurley!"

Looking at him, Thurley saw that his face was a dangerous, shiny white as if he had been ill a long time and his eyes were deadish, burnt-out things.

"I am sorry," she began impulsively, "that you've no joy left —"

Hobart recalled himself and began pointing out errors in her last song. They did not go beneath the surface again during the lesson. When it was finished, Hobart said November would probably be the month of her début,

THE GRAY ANGELS

— not in “Faust” as she had fondly imagined but as the vivacious *Rosina* in “The Barber of Seville”; protest all she liked, *Rosina* it was to be.

“That is nearly seven months away,” he said, looking out at the April sky. “Ernestine writes she will be home by June and you will start soon after. You must be back by the middle of September — however, that gives you quite a holiday. From now on, Thurley, I shall not see you —” he held out his hand but she did not seem to notice.

“Where are you going?”

“London, to superintend some pantomime things and opera. I’ll be back in June but not until you have sailed; we’ll almost be ships passing in the night. But I’ll be here in September to hear you tell of the Old World as seen by two very blue eyes. To-morrow you will please go to Santoza for coaching. You don’t like him and he likes no one save his gnarled old self — he has seen too many women play hob with too many men ever to like the loveliest of beginners. But he will teach you all you need to know and Antone will take you for the singing hour. If Lissa suggests that she coach you, ward her off. Now, my little prodigy, good-by and a happy summer.”

Still Thurley did not take his hand. “Where do you go from June until September?” she demanded.

Hobart neither glowered nor started as she anticipated. He laughed and patted her shoulder, whispering, “Ah, that would be telling —”

Some one tapped at his door and Thurley, perforce, tore herself away.

She would not see Bliss Hobart for nearly seven months . . . seven months . . . then she would make her *début*! Well, if she could glean from Ernestine bits

THE GRAY ANGELS

of her philosophy and from Polly her contagious jollity and add a trifle of Lissa's purring loveliness — and she became as famous as her own voice could make any one — perhaps even Bliss Hobart might be tempted to say where he disappeared each year!

Thurley was planning a startling series of events between herself and Bliss Hobart as she left the building, trying not to let tears crowd her blue eyes or betray she was perturbed. . . . Santoza, hateful ogre with dirty, yellow hands, absurd, striped clothes and long, greasy hair, always mumbling to himself in Italian — she must study with Santoza and have those yellow, soiled fingers whirl angrily in the air as he tried to explain wherein she was in error and with Antone, that cynical little dandy with no more heart than flint, who stared at her through half-closed lids and only ridiculed, never praised!

Then Thurley resolved a dangerous but very feminine thing. Had she but known, many other younger and lovelier women than herself had resolved the same thing regarding Bliss Hobart. She would make him *care* for her! Not even Miss Clergy's vow should prove an obstacle. She would make him care . . . after that was an undetermined stage of rapture, a new and alluring sort of ooze in which to take refuge after hateful hours with Santoza and Antone and wondering moments as to what Hobart was doing and where he hid for his summer holiday! Thurley would make him care. Having achieved that, she would then employ Lissa's theories as a vaulting pole to take her well over the handicap which Miss Clergy fancied she had forever placed in the way of romantic love.

No woman had yet succeeded. This Thurley did not know; like all the others she was sure that she was to prove the exception.

THE GRAY ANGELS

She worked with Antone and Santoza cultivating an attitude of indifference to offset their unpleasant personalities. Miss Clergy, in her squirrel cage of a world, looked on with pleased but feeble eyes and told Thurley she must go abroad with Ernestine Christian.

"You'll come, too?" Thurley begged. "You must not stay so alone. All you do is to drive and read — and you do read the same books over and over — and talk with me a little and sleep a great deal. When I drag you into a shop you are as timid as can be and you won't meet people though I've coaxed and begged. Please come with us — think of France, Spain, Italy," Thurley hurried on to produce many new and tempting arguments.

Miss Clergy shook her head. "He came from Italy," she said. "I could not bear it."

Remorseful, undecided what was best to say, Thurley stood back abashed. "Oh, don't let it hurt for so long — you've burnt up all your joy," recalling Hobart's words.

Miss Clergy waved Thurley off. "I'll go to a rest cure," she decided. "Now be off, my head is starting to ache."

Still Thurley hesitated. "You won't go back to the Corners?" she asked.

Miss Clergy gave a cackling laugh. "Don't worry, Thurley, I'd not go back even to dance at Dan Birge's wedding."

Thurley left the room. She tried Ernestine's antidote for heart stirrings as she practised scales, louder and louder in more and more glorious a voice until Miss Clergy fell asleep, happy at heart — for had she not at the eleventh hour saved a genius from mediocrity and secured revenge for her withered tragedy?

THE GRAY ANGELS

The first Sunday morning in May, Polly Harris appeared to carry Thurley off, first to her attic to retrieve something she had forgotten, and next to Collin Hedley's garden and château a few miles up the Hudson.

"I knew this wasn't lesson day and so I was sure you would come along. Wear something old because Collin's place is one of those shabby-elegant affairs where new costumes seem vulgar. I think the only time when Lissa is ever uncomfortable is at Collin's garden parties, but she has to come because she is jealous of Mark and there she is, a great, painted doll among real things."

Polly audaciously danced about Miss Clergy's rooms while Thurley hurried into her blue serge with a flat, black sailor. Polly kept up a pleasing conversation with Miss Clergy as to Thurley's début and the proposed trip abroad, the wonderful things Bliss had been doing in London and what a jolly world it was anyhow, actually tucking an extra pillow behind Miss Clergy's back and leaving her the last issue of a shocking art journal as her proper Sabbath reading. Hobart had truly prophesied that when Polly went to heaven she would be given the position of keeping every one chirked up when things promised to be a trifle ponderous.

"Let's be ordinary critters and fly down to my sky parlor on a Fifth Avenue 'bus," she proposed. "I pay the fares," jingling her coin purse.

"Oh, no, Polly," Thurley interposed. Thurley did not comprehend what Ernestine had tried to impress so carefully upon her — that Polly was not yet defeated, that she must be careful lest she hint of the opinions of the family which were that defeat for Polly was inevitable.

Polly pursed up her mouth crossly. "Do, Thurley, this is my party," she insisted, after which Thurley gave

THE GRAY ANGELS

way and let Polly spend two precious dimes in lordly fashion.

As they proceeded down the Avenue, seated on the top of a Washington Square 'bus and quite as happy as when Ernestine had taken them out in her motor, Polly said,

"I haven't had the chance of really doing anything for you, Thurley —"

"You have, too; there was Sam Sparling —"

"Yes, but no one is like Collin." Her face was illumined from within. Thurley's dramatic sense caught the wonderful hopelessness of the expression, cold-bloodedly resolving to copy it in any rôle which should demand a similar emotion. "Collin is the most wonderful person in the world, besides being the most wonderful painter. I'm so glad he asked us out for Sunday. He'd have done so before but he's terrifically busy. All the world crowds his doorstep to be painted. Fancy, Collin has no New York studio — if people wish his work they must come to him and come they do. When you see Parva Sed Apta, you'll understand why it is the only place in the world of its kind and how beautiful and good is Collin's own self." Polly was unconscious of her betrayal.

"Is he as wonderful as Bliss Hobart? Ernestine says Collin painted Mr. Hobart's portrait and it made him."

Polly was loath to give up her argument. "Well, Bliss is wonderful — no one denies that — but in a different way. There are so many sides to Bliss; one day he is a hermit, the next a schoolboy, then a stern master, a diplomat, a sarcastic critic, a taskmaster — sometimes, very rarely of late, he is a dreamer, as idealistic as the tints of the skies in Collin's pictures. But Collin is always Collin, a child with a talent so huge he does not comprehend it himself and, therefore, he can never be spoiled."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Has he never married?" Thurley asked innocently.

"Oh, no," Polly's answer was made in breathless haste, "he never thinks of such a thing — he is absorbed in work . . . why, if one is his friend, it is all one should expect . . . it is enough," she added bravely.

"Do you think Caleb Patmore will marry?" Thurley braced her little boots against the front board of the 'bus as they rounded a bump in the pavement.

"Not unless some one makes Ernestine realize she has a heart tucked away in that austere bosom of hers. . . . I could beat Ernestine for not loving that boy," and the thought of Polly, so tiny and gentle in her brown garb, and of Ernestine, stately and unapproachable, in some smoky drapery, made Thurley give way to a chuckle.

"Don't try it unless you take a course of jiu-jitsu," she advised.

But Polly was rambling on in a new vein. "When Ernestine returns, she will take you to Caleb's house; then you'll see how a famous novelist who has commercialized himself lives — and you won't like it! Every June Ernestine visits Caleb and generally takes me as ballast — sort of grand duchess conferring a favor, you know. The rest of the year, unless Caleb entertains, he has to come to her whenever she will have him, starved of heart, yet loyal. (Of course if people care they do stay loyal) . . . but wait until you see Caleb's sleek establishment and contrast it with Collin's transplanted paradise."

They jumped off the 'bus steps and made their way down a narrow, side street which was most distressingly dirty to Thurley's mind, reaching a dilapidated brown-stone-front house with "Rooms for Rent" in the parlor windows. Skipping up a fire escape on the outside, with Thurley toiling after, Polly opened a bit of a window on the top floor, jumped down inside while the boards

THE GRAY ANGELS

creaked perilously and then assisted Thurley to do likewise.

"I never go up the inside way unless it is winter," she explained, "because every poor devil would stop to ask for a loan. I can't refuse unless I'm stony broke and I can't afford to part with the little I have. Of course they can't pay back, poor dears! So the fire escape affords an excellent subterfuge and no one's feelings are hurt. I want to take Collin a book on woodcuts; I found it at an old bookstore the other day." She was prowling about a dusty secretary, opening drawers and failing to close them.

Thurley stood in the center of the room aghast at Polly's attic. Ernestine and Caleb had prepared her for it, saying with almost reproach that she, Thurley, was missing the glorious camaraderie with failures, she was the proverbial jewel in the rough who was taken to an expert lapidary, cut, polished and placed in platinum without any transitional stage! And she would do well to learn more of Polly's life so as to glean the atmosphere of optimistic struggle, humorous cares and sometimes indescribable pathos. So much Thurley did in the moment she waited for Polly to find the book—a book costing a week's earnings!

The room was badly in need of repair; the roof sloped down so Thurley had to crouch if she moved but a foot either way—it reminded her of Betsey Pilrig's attic. There was a cot made into a divan with a turkey red covering and pillows, a scrap of a rag rug, an easel, for Polly did commercial drawings fairly well, a table one confusion of doll furniture and china dolls dressed in wisps of silk, satin and burlap. Polly explained this was her "tryout"—when she was planning scenes in her opera, she had the puppets assume positions so as to

THE GRAY ANGELS

gauge the effect. She was so serious about the matter that Thurley was forced to conceal a laugh as she said the idea was excellent.

"I have no typewriter; did have last winter, but I played in hard luck and left it at 'uncle's.'—I scribble almost as swiftly and so it's of no consequence," she added contentedly. "Just last week I had an idea and I think it is a real idea, Thurley—as you are to sing the title rôle I'll tell it to you. Instead of having THE American opera founded on the landing of Columbus and a romance of an Indian girl with one of his knights and so on—of course I'll finish it and have it produced later," she supplemented in all seriousness—"I have decided to do a series of operas dealing with American wars. First, the Revolution—you are to be Moll Pitcher—then 1812—then the Mexican War—the Civil War—the Spanish-American—pray heaven there will be no other. Don't you see how great it will be—great—*great?*" her body swaying with excitement. "Yesterday, I did two arias." She fumbled about the secretary and unearthed music paper covered with startling black notes. "Oh, Thurley, I must succeed—I must. I won't take no from either gods or half-gods. I'll defy them! I won't slink away and become an upstate saleswoman for victrolas! There!"

"I hope you will," Thurley said gently.

"You say that as if you'd like to add, 'Here, my pore gel, take this quarter and wear a cap the next time you meet me!' Wait—wait until you fail."

Thurley's spirit was roused. "But I won't—not in my work."

"There are other ways than work—love, for instance?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I won't fail in love," the defiant, wild-rose Thurley was always on hand to meet a challenge.

"Don't promise yourself everything," was Polly's sage advice, "and now, I believe we are ready to decamp."

CHAPTER XVIII

She found Collin's place more than Polly said, since Polly viewed it through adoring eyes and was blind to tiny flaws.

Their approach was anything but conventional. They had raced up from the station, Polly winning by a nose, hilarious young persons with flushed faces.

They found the famous Collin, in an artist's smock of gray chambray, sweeping off his front steps! Upon seeing them, he called out,

"Cook left last night with a case of champagne — there are all the dishes to wash . . . and the boy left yesterday morning with my two best suits — oh, ho, art is merely incidental," continuing his sweeping in vigorous fashion.

Then he dropped the broom and came down the walk to meet them.

His garden had the air of age and mystery. The famous statue of Aphrodite attributed to Praxiteles was in a monolith of white marble lined with brass and surrounded by a small fountain which paid her homage. As soon as midsummer came, he explained to Thurley, there would be yellow lilies with heavy sweetness, the clean fragrance of shy heliotrope, creamy, bending tassels of spiræa forming an aisle up to the white stucco house with its contrasting dark, wooden trimmings.

But when they entered the hall, Thurley gasped with amused dismay, for she had seldom seen such conglomeration and disorder. It was true there were pink mar-

THE GRAY ANGELS

bleized walls, tall lapis lazuli pillars capped with gold and an emerald malachite cornice with a black baseboard in the big studio. In addition to the collection of rare eighteenth century furniture with needlepoint chairs and blue and silver hangings, the growing plants and endless bird cages filled with twittering English bullfinches, there were strewn carelessly rare Greek vases and Etruscan fragments, an ugly easel and modelling stand, spotted canvases carelessly lying about. On chairs, but more often on the floor, were jars of brushes, rare lithographs by Whistler, Puvis de Chavannes' drawings, Meryon's etchings and Conder's painted silks. Half finished portraits and charcoal outlines of figures were pinned relentlessly on the walls, and a shaggy Airedale answering the name of Fencer came muzzling the guests in suspicious welcome and walked without concern on all of the treasures.

The only books the room contained were a well worn Bible and a Human Anatomy. The curtains were twisted back into hideous shapes, some fastened with twine, others with artist's thumb-tacks, and one was thrown over the cornice in gay disregard.

"You see," said Collin, "I never should have yielded to Caleb's plea to have an artistic studio. By degrees, I have managed to move out some stuff and send it over to his lodge. He thrives on such things — color schemes and doing rooms over. But some fine day there will be a bonfire at Parva Sed Apta and, hoop-la, I'll build a log cabin with nothing but glass for the roof and sit in the midst of the débris to paint the most wonderful pictures of women."

"Poor women, posing in your log cabin." Polly pretended to be cross. "Now we must get this room to rights."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Never." He pushed her aside. "I'll not allow a thing to be straightened. The rest of the house is like a bandbox and I spend as little time there as I can. But here is where I live."

Fencer lay down to roll over an etching as if emphasizing the statement.

"Here," corrected Collin, "is where *we* live."

"Show Thurley Bliss's portrait and then we'll do up the dishes and cook our dinner — a fine sort of host you are."

"Cook had been meditating an elopement some time — a gentleman who works in a roundhouse, I believe, has been carrying the wedding ring in his pocket for days. The boy always envied my suits — and as he was offered more wages to go to Bermuda, I presume he thought the suits a bonus for having endured an artistic atmosphere . . . oh, well, I'll call up the agency to-morrow and order a fresh supply; they'll stay a week anyhow and that takes me through the dinner I'm supposed to give on Wednesday — well, Thurley, are you much amused?"

They were walking down the hall into his drawing-room, spick and span by contrast, done in the coolest of grays with long, glimmering curtains of silver damask, the furniture of polished magnolia wood with a yellow-topped Italian marble console and many-branched silver candlesticks. The only ornament in the room was Hobart's portrait; it stood on a great easel on a platform, curtains halfway veiling it.

Thurley's heart began an annoying pit-a-pat as she sought the correct light in which to view it. Polly and Collin each taking a curtain threw them back together and for a long instant Thurley was silent as she looked with eyes, as betraying of her love as Polly's had been, at the wonderful face of a man. It was a man who had

THE GRAY ANGELS

recently left happy youth behind because he had discovered it to be disillusioning and had taken up manhood with no disgruntled attitude of resentment nor aggressive determination to win by trickery but with ideals — ideals impossible to defeat but hidden so safely from the world at large that they were incapable of practical expression. The lips smiled of love and sighed for regret and prayed for all the universe — there was that much painted into the picture. The eyes were shining, gray eyes showing the art of putting a bad ending to the purpose of becoming a good and fresh beginning. He was one who would try to practise some ancient but forgotten unity of the human race. As Thurley stared at the strange face with its rare smile of understanding, she recalled the Scotch legend of the Wells of Peace which an old circus clown had told her of years ago.

The Wells of Peace, so the clown had said, were Love, Beauty, Dreams, Endurance, Compassion, Rest, Love Fulfilled! All the "little people" of the hills and forest, even the peewits who had been baseborn children, were searching endlessly for the Wells of Peace — for he who found them and drank of the water could wish for anything in the world and it would be his!

"Kiss her, Collin; that will make her speak! Are you turning into a statue, Thurley?"

Thurley stirred at the sound of Polly's voice.

Collin was holding back the curtain and laughing at her. "Never knew I could hold a pose so long," he said as he dropped it. "Why, Thurley, are you so susceptible to an old brigand like Bliss? Fancy him, now, walking down Piccadilly and humming,

" 'I'm going back to Lunnon,

" 'To tea and long frock coats' — and a bevy of peeresses trailing afterwards! "

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley let the actress in her shield the woman. She made laughable comments about the portrait, vowing that the color scheme of the room had given her new ideas for costumes, going through the rest of Parva Sed Apta with a careless demeanor.

The dining-room should have been a charming spot with its green English chintz, dead white walls and red and gold furniture, but it was heaped with soiled dishes and curious cooking utensils piled high with "concoctions."

"I had a fearful appetite the moment cook left," Collin explained, "so I thought I'd try my luck. . . . They all tasted queer — like mixtures of carpet tacks and modelling clay. The way I explain it is the excess paprika and I had been modelling and neglected to wash my hands."

"Oh, good," Polly interrupted. "Show us what you were doing," making him return to the studio to rescue the clay model of a bird with a newly broken wing.

"Splendid," Polly declared. "There is a force — a stirring — *il y a quelque chose*," turning to Thurley for approval.

"It hurts to look at it, poor little thing! It must have been from a gun and not an accident."

Collin actually blushed. "You really feel that, too?"

"Of course — see how the wing drags — oh, why not model it complete?"

Polly gave a triumphant whistle. "Always told him so. I wish now that he's oodles of money, he'd stop painting fat dowagers and silly men in broadcloth and model — model what he dreams."

Collin wrapped the bird in the moist cloth. "You are partial. I cannot model — nor can I tear myself away from color. I dream color, woo it, I could eat it —

THE GRAY ANGELS

now, maybe that was the trouble with the cooking! I was trying to put taupe shadows in the picture of the Hooker children . . . anyway, Thurley, I worked as 'ghost' for the great Constantin and, after seeing his modelling, I never even fancied I could do likewise. It is merely remembering my days with him when I take up the clay, sentimental tribute — artistic fashion of drinking a toast. He had but one rule: 'When you can model a human hand as large as the top of your thumb, you can model anything,' he told us. . . . One day, when I tried, he said in his carping old fashion, 'Hein, what is that, Hedley? A hand? So! I would mark it assaulted toad!' And I never tried modelling again."

He seemed anxious to dismiss the subject and show them his last portrait. As he talked in his sweet, light voice, Thurley watched the childlike, tyrannical way in which he waited for praise and believed all they said of his work. He was seemingly unconscious of Polly's hungry heart — and empty purse — and as Thurley studied him she realized that Collin possessed a great virtue — and a great fault.

The virtue was expressed by his brilliant, joyous eyes which told her his was the sixth sense — the ability to look at his subject and say, "Ah, I won't paint in the heartbreak, it would be too cruel! Just pleasant shadows," or "Shall I show the greed which made you play the cad? I think I shall — it needs to be exploited even if you did buy off the press," or "There is a promise of good things and you shall have them painted clearly so that when you look at yourself you will feel the need of living up to that promise — a sort of jacking-up, old man — with your slightly weak mouth but glorious forehead," or "You are young and beautiful and you've the

THE GRAY ANGELS

world before you, but I shall find that gray-gold seriousness of your woman's soul and make it illumine your face; then you won't go getting too light of heart and careless of tongue — as you might with the flurry of dimples!" So the world had come to speak of a Hedley portrait as something to be almost fearful of — it was so real — and yet, with this ability, Thurley admitted as the day wore on with their playing at housekeeping or romping in the garden, drinking black coffee while Collin and Polly played guitar and ukelele duets, Collin remained a child. Whether this was purposely achieved or a strange whim of Mother Nature was yet to be proved. But a child he was, whimsical, lovable, worth while but unstable — and he skillfully shut away the duties of maturity by this very fact. Collin shirked responsibility! So did Ernestine, but in a cynical, combative fashion. Collin did it with studied innocence! As the child has imagination as its greatest charm and asset, so did Collin claim it for his own, at the same time retaining that opinion of women which the child possesses: A woman has but two possibilities — tyrant or slave, therefore she can never be his equal. The child regards his nurse or mother as a guardian angel or an unfair oppressor of rights, and so Collin chose to regard women — staying aloof from entangling romance!

He called Polly his pal, said with admiration that she had never passed out of that flapper period when every woman wishes she had been born a boy, therefore, Polly was a delight to know! He helped her when she least suspected it, liked and admired her, but he kept that armor of childish irresponsibility about his famous, selfish self and no matter how keenly he might gaze into the souls of those he painted, his own soul was wrapped in nursery eiderdown and labelled, "Unwrap me and you

THE GRAY ANGELS

destroy genius!" Polly, like all women who love but once, understood and was content with crumbs.

"I shall go abroad when Ernestine does," Thurley heard him saying when she had lured Fencer into the garden to play retrieve.

"I'm so glad — do get rested, you will be rushed with orders next winter," Polly answered. Thurley knew just the look in those stabbed brown eyes!

"What will you do, pal mine?"

"Be tremendously busy, my opera scores, naturally, and for a pot-boiler I've hired out as proofreader during the regulars' vacations. I'm to have a famous summer." She picked up the ukelele and began strumming.

"I'll find you the prettiest mantilla in Spain," he promised, "but don't worry if you have no letters — I can't write letters any more than a woman can understand banking. But you'll write to me, won't you, Polly?"

"Of course — we'll all write," she answered bravely.

Thurley paused, unmindful of Fencer's bark, and pondered on many things, the portrait of the real Bliss Hobart, the man who was worth winning, as she thought with new logic, on Miss Clergy's vow which cheapened any love no matter how many Lissas might argue to the contrary — unrequited love such as Polly's — on Caleb, smug and amusing and much in need of Ernestine Christian's heart, on Ernestine, busy with scales and cigarettes and pessimistic utterances, on Sam Sparling, who had told her during one of their happy talks, "Be a woman first, my child," on November, with the prospect of the début . . . well, had Dan married Lorraine and was it true that a man was nothing short of a hero who married a brilliant woman? What a world it was and wouldn't it be a relief to have had Ali Baba say it all for her with his usual: "Land sakes and Mrs. Davis, but

THE GRAY ANGELS

some folks are going to be mighty nervous when it comes Judgment Day!"

At that identical moment in Birge's Corners, Dan and Lorraine were driving through the Boston Valley hills. It had been a hateful Sunday, to Dan's mind; service in the morning and himself dancing attendance on the minister's daughter when all the time he longed to bolt from the church to escape the nasal tones of Milly Crawford, the new soloist from Pike. He wanted to sit on the step of the box-car wagon in sulky retrospect. But instead, he meekly followed Lorraine into the parsonage and ate the dinner she had carefully prepared, smoking on the porch while Lorraine "did up the work," and now they had driven the best part of the afternoon, returning for the monotonous evening service, the cold meat and jelly tea and the customary Sunday night courtship on the vine-covered porch.

"Dan," said Lorraine timidly, one hand reaching over to feel the solitaire on the other; — it gave her courage; — "is the new house getting on all right?"

He turned to look at her; she was such a frail, pretty thing in her silk dress — three summers old and home-made at that — her eyes were raised to his as if she were a good heathen looking at a shrine to ask the granting of a boon.

"Yes," he said with dangerous gentleness. "Why?"

She dropped her head. "I was just wondering —"

Dan smiled; the savage, buoyant Dan had vanished. Fine, hard lines were about his mouth and his eyes were staring, non-expressive. Every one in the Corners knew what Lorraine had "put up with" since Thurley Pre-core had given him the mitten and he had engaged himself for spite — the weeks when Dan drank, Lorraine for-

THE GRAY ANGELS

giving and praying over him, the times when he deliberately ogled other girls — not the nice girls, either — those women with hard, bold eyes who always live at the outskirts of any small town, coming in Saturday nights to prance along the streets arm in arm, making every one clear out of their way, who laugh loudly and make humorous comments when they pass travelling men. Dan had not only talked with these persons — he had taken them driving in his car.

Still Lorraine had refused to believe the reports. She had wept her tears and said her prayers in the solitude of her room with only the hope chest as confidant. Then the minister talked to Dan — with the result that Lorraine, with unheralded defiance, came into the room during the scene and told her father she was Dan's bespoken wife; she would always be willing to "bear with him."

"Seems as if there's nothing he can do to get rid of her except hang himself," was the village verdict.

"'Course he's sweet on Thurley — and whatever is she doing all this time? I guess Miss Clergy has spent enough money to teach her how to sing," would be the answer.

Almost indifferently Dan had resigned himself to his fate and the new house began to near completion.

"I hope he won't break out wild after they're married," Ali Baba said.

"A Birge never married no woman with spirit; they all die and leave a son," Hopeful used to answer.

"Well, Thurley knew her mind, no matter if it was right or wrong," would be Betsey's consolation.

"Would you like to be married this fall?" Dan finally asked Lorraine on this Sunday afternoon.

"It's a little soon, but I guess I could be ready," she fibbed according to feminine custom.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Well, I suppose we may as well! Say when."

Lorraine's cheeks were crimson with excitement. "November?"

His face clouded. November was a semi-sacred month, Thurley's birth month — but then, was not all the village sacred because Thurley had lived there? Where could he turn without a haunting memory, what person could he pass without recalling some incident in their life together?

"All right — about the fifteenth; I'll be ready to get away then. We'll go to New York for a couple of weeks. Would you like that?"

Lorraine nodded. They were both thinking the same thing: suppose fate should cause them to meet Thurley Precore?

When Dan left her that night, kissing her dutifully and saying some polite thing about being a lucky fellow, Lorraine went upstairs to the little hope chest and began counting over her woman's trifles.

"Poor Thurley," she said out loud, "he's mine now . . . and he will learn to care."

Dan returned to the Hotel Button and went up to his rooms. He sat at his desk, scribbling on a bit of paper. Then he took a fresh sheet and wrote: "Dear Thurley" — but nothing else suggested itself.

"She wouldn't give a hoot, you poor fool," he told himself.

Finally he tore the paper up and whistling with utmost cheeriness tramped about the room and tried to take an interest in planning the decorations of the twenty-thousand-dollar house. It was Thurley's house no matter what all the ministers and marriage licenses might try to prove to the contrary.

CHAPTER XIX

Ernestine returned in June nervously overwrought and almost petulant at having to wait for her sailing reservations. Thurley saw a new sort of Ernestine Christian, prophetic hint as to her own future if she continued with her work.

"Don't speak to me until we've been out at sea for a day," Ernestine commanded, "then I'll be a lovely, rosy *thing*, the jolliest big sister ever, and I'll play the rest of the summer. Ask Collin — he knows. Collin, Bliss and I have often crossed together, and when we went aboard the boys seriously considered asking the steward not to place us at the same table. By the time we reached Havre they were making violent love to me, wondering if their own eyes had played them false in the beginning of the trip," after which she unceremoniously bundled Thurley out of her apartment.

Thurley accepted the hint, as she had plenty to do in getting Miss Clergy's summer wardrobe completed and accompanying her to a rustic lodge in the Adirondacks where she would drone away the golden summer as she wished. Thurley had assumed, perforce, a maternal attitude towards Miss Clergy; she was even dictatorial and bullied her a trifle about being nice to other elderly persons who invited Miss Clergy for tea — Thurley had found this demeanor to have excellent results.

Although it was with relief that she left the ghost-lady at her summer's boarding-place, it was with regret as well. Thurley had begun to feel that Miss Clergy

THE GRAY ANGELS

"belonged" to her as she had always tried to fancy some one somewhere must belong to her if she would only be patient long enough.

"I sha'n't worry about you," Miss Clergy had told her. "You're the most satisfactory thing I ever owned." Unconsciously she had spoken the truth. She did regard Thurley as a beautiful, talented sort of unsexed person dependent upon her for existence. Unselfish affection never entered the partnership. She wondered why Thurley had turned away so abruptly as she spoke and pretended she had an errand outside the room.

"'The most satisfactory thing,'" Thurley kept repeating as the car wheels turned her nearer New York and the coveted trip abroad. "'The most satisfactory thing'—and I'm an 'amusing thing' to Ernestine, almost as amusing as Silverheels, only she loves Silverheels. And I'm an 'interesting young thing' to Bliss Hobart, some one who came to earth knowing how to sing and so he is spared the trouble of teaching me. And I'm a 'lucky young thing,' as Polly says, because I've the chance she has not, and I'm a 'dangerous young thing' to Lissa because Mark Wirth likes me—oh, if she knew how often he sends flowers—and I suppose Caleb thinks me a 'worth while young thing' because he gains hints for a new heroine. . . . I want just to be some one's Thurley!" She looked at the hills without but she could not see them distinctly for tear-blurred eyes.

When she reached New York she telephoned Ernestine, only to be told she could not sail for at least another week, nor did Ernestine wish to be disturbed,—Silverheels had been accidentally killed and Ernestine had suffered a nervous collapse.

Thurley heard the news rather carelessly. "Too bad," she had said, "I would rather he went out quickly

THE GRAY ANGELS

than to be one of those blind little creatures that are a burden to themselves."

"You don't understand," Ernestine answered sharply. "You don't know anything about it. I am taking him west to an animal cemetery and I shall pick out a handsome headstone."

Thurley wondered if this was a strained sort of joke. "Really?" she asked.

At which came a volley of reproaches over the wire to the effect that most assuredly would there be a memorial for Silverheels as well as a headstone; no other animal could ever take his place nor would she ever allow any other animal to make inroads into her heart. She wished his name never to be mentioned; perhaps Thurley would develop sufficiently within the next few years to comprehend that animal tragedies were the hardest to bear!

Which left Thurley feeling like a smacked infant not at all knowing the reason for the smacking.

The hotel suite seemed musty and in bad taste as she wandered about restlessly. She must wait now until Ernestine chose to sail; she must keep away from her and amuse herself. She did not want to worry Miss Clergy with writing of the delay and she had closed her lesson books with an eager hand. Polly was busy doing some sort of hack work, and she supposed Collin would go off to Europe on the steamer they had planned to take. Anyway, she felt a shy reserve in calling him up to find out.

She was halfway angered at being forced into this submissive attitude. When she was a prima donna earning her own money she resolved that she would lead her own life in no half tones. It was all very well to know interesting, famous persons but to be at the mercy of their thousand and one peculiar notions and erratic actions was

THE GRAY ANGELS

another matter. She noticed that Collin respected Ernestine's wishes and Ernestine also respected Collin's. Save for Caleb's being in love with Ernestine and thus being rendered somewhat helpless, he followed his own inclinations and permitted Ernestine to do likewise. No one dreamed of telling Bliss Hobart what to do and what not to do and never did any one, although disapproving of Lissa, contemplate trying to reform her. Mark danced as he would and lived as he wished and there was an end of it. And who in the wide world had more latitude than Sam Sparling, who flirted with a duchess one day and had a shop girl driving in his car the next, giving midnight orgies for "the boys" and sending them packing when his nerves gave warning — Sam who flew off to Lake Louise one day, recklessly cancelling engagements, and returning very keen for the green room and the footlights to play for weeks at a time and then "hop across," as he said, to Paris to rent some crumbling château and have it put in the pink of condition while he was engrossed in reading and rehearsing a new repertoire like a veritable savant. Lucky Sam, Lissa, Mark, Ernestine, Collin, Caleb — all of them for that matter! Thurley's lips were rebellious of expression as she sat that warm June morning before the window, looking at the Avenue which throbbed with personalities each bent on its own way.

She registered a vow that she, too, would acquire a personality, a hobby, a "phobia," an intricate set of nerves and a color scheme — dear, yes, there should be no end to her "dew-dabs," as Hobart named them. She would even have her own perfume, she would "recommend" a certain fabric and have her picture taken in a gown of it and printed in a leading fashion journal. She would rule over her apartment as rigorously as these others ruled

THE GRAY ANGELS

over theirs; she would evolve a distinctive form of entertainment — to say nothing of openly indulging in moods and sulks and wild bursts of joy — and cigarettes and liquors if they did not harm her voice. This should be the reward for these snubbed months of being the spectator, dependent on some one else's bounty.

There likewise came an impulse not worthy of the real Thurley — nevertheless it came as strongly and with as much temptation as all the rest of her tempestuous plans. When she was rich and famous and still beautiful, she would return to the Corners to haunt Dan Birge as he had never dreamed a woman could haunt him. She would have some sort of romantic interest in her life even if she had given her pledge to Miss Clergy never to make the hideous mistake of marriage.

As she sat there, some one tapped at the door and, running to open it, she found Caleb Patmore dressed in motor togs, his goggles pushed up on his forehead and a linen duster buttoned to his chin.

"I suppose you're in mourning," he said whimsically, "or have you insulted Ernestine by suggesting it is madness to swelter in town another week while she interviews all the monument makers as to the most fetching feline memorial?"

Thurley gave him a grateful expression. "It does seem foolish."

"I've been banished forever from her presence — because I sent no flowers," he laughed. "However, she told me to get you and take you out for the day — she can't keep her June day custom of visiting me at the lodge and you are appointed proxy. Come along, you look ready for a frolic."

Thurley raced into her bedroom and tilted her hat over one eye. "My word, it will be good to go some-

THE GRAY ANGELS

where. Imagine coming back from the mountains bubbling with excitement and finding the trip delayed for days. If it had been hours I would not have minded — but days —”

“And you’ve never been across, have you?” he asked sympathetically.

“Oh, never,” she answered in despair. “You don’t think Ernestine will give up the trip, do you?”

“Not as bad as that, because she has persuaded Collin to wait the week as well. It might be worse. All set, are you? First, I’ve some errands and then we’ll shoot out to the lodge and I’ll feed you the best strawberries floating in the richest cream you ever tasted.”

Thurley found bromidic enjoyment in Caleb’s country place. It was refreshing in its air of order. She felt that to be a commercialized artist had compensations, at least it enabled one to acquire what one wished of true art and appreciate it all the more by contrast with one’s own attempts!

Returning to the hotel, she found a note from Ernestine saying she had “come out of it” sufficiently to engage passage for the following Tuesday and she hoped Thurley would never mention Silverheels to her nor invite tragedy herself by acquiring a pet.

Thurley lay awake that hot summer’s night — the nearness of the vacation did not delight her over-much. Instead, she was thinking of herself as contrasted with Bliss, Collin, Ernestine, Caleb — even Polly. For there was a difference of birthright between these persons and herself. With a burning sense of discontent yet enforced honesty, Thurley realized that she had in herself a strain of sturdy peasantry; these others were more gently born — there was a difference in the way they spoke, dressed — she felt too superlative and over-insisting in compari-

THE GRAY ANGELS

son. She wondered whether in time she would acquire the atmosphere of gentle breeding which these persons possessed. Lissa had somewhat the same strain as herself — and she prayed she would not become like Lissa.

The difference between the peasant and the patrician, Thurley concluded, after restless reflection, was that the peasant cannot endure pain, physical or mental, as well as he can stand hardships, lack of the niceties of existence, whereas the patrician can endure anguish but he cannot tolerate discomfort. A poorly fitting or coarse gown would prevent Ernestine from playing her best, whereas Thurley could sing in calico, standing on the steps of her old box-car wagon. Ernestine could "rescue" herself from suffering, a sort of diking away of any too engulfing emotion, whereas, if Thurley's heart was aching or her mental state disturbed, she would not sing — she was like a wood beastie wanting to dart into deep forests and hide indefinitely.

Thurley had begun to long for ancestors, she admitted with a sigh; to possess portraits of spinsters with crumbling lace fichus and slim, white hands — Aunt so-and-so or Grandmother and Grandfather Precore! She wanted heirlooms, some tangible evidence of a family. Winter circus quarters with the pretended family recalled themselves to her with scant comfort. She was so young and promising and she was to spend her life singing for the world and not for any one loved person! There had been Dan who wanted her to sing for just himself. Had she loved Dan as Lorraine did, she would have been content to have it so. She would have married Dan by now, the new house would be glowing with rosy shaded lamps, passers-by would halt their teams to listen to Thurley singing to her husband . . . but that was not the way it was to be. If only some kind spirit

THE GRAY ANGELS

with the power to release vows and wave a wand to change things about could do so and create such a house as Dan planned for her and yet have Bliss Hobart be its master and Thurley its mistress — how very silly and stupid would New York and opera seem, all these over-smart, cynical persons with self-consciousness their dominating note and selfish egotism their guardian angel! She would sing for her husband and work to please him. And how simple was the big rule of life, Thurley thought, as she sat up among the pillows, sleep the furthest from her thoughts: Love some one and have some one love you and make everything else resultant and interdependent! She sank back slowly — for she had promised never to marry and in so doing it had come about that she should meet the person whom she would have married had he been a steam-riveter! Ernestine and Europe seemed phantoms — she was not interested. Nor was she interested in Dan and Lorraine and their future. She was unconscious of everything except that Bliss Hobart treated her for the most part impersonally, disappearing without explanation although the Buddha still stayed on his desk.

Mark, Lissa, Polly, Sam and Caleb saw the trio set sail — as gay a farewell as one could imagine, with Lissa in a costume indicating that she had achieved social distinction and Polly with her funny epigrams and humorous antics, clever mask for her aching heart. Mark had sent Thurley a basket of roses which were to be delivered that evening, but which the steward stupidly hauled to light before Lissa's eyes.

"You better play safe," Caleb murmured to Mark who was hanging over Thurley's chair and refusing to notice Lissa's efforts to get him away.

"One doesn't see a girl like Thurley off for her first

THE GRAY ANGELS

trip across every day," Mark answered. "Anyway, she'll not be bothering with any of us in a year's time; she's destined to have a coronet on her handkerchief."

Sam Sparling had made Thurley count inkstains on his fingers, which he had obtained by writing letters of introduction to his friends scattered in France and England. Collin, who was in a fearful stew about having left behind his pet kit of brushes, fumed up and down the deck with Caleb reminding him that there were shops in Paris.

Polly stood towards the rear of the group as they were given their shore warning.

"Good-by, Polly — a world of luck!" Collin said easily.

"Good-by, Collin — the same to you!"

"Good-by," Ernestine called out. "When you see me next, I'll be known as Thurley's chaperone — I'm submerging my personality!"

"Good-by — America," a sudden childish fear took possession of Thurley.

A chorus of jeers answered her. "Really? Well, nothing like being impersonal first to last. . . . I say, Thurley, if you're not more polite, we'll go buy a locket and each chop off a lock of hair and stick inside. How would you like that for an albatross?"

"Good-by, Americans," she corrected, "it's just — just —"

"Sing it," suggested Polly.

Without ado, Thurley began "Auld Lang Syne," causing waving handkerchiefs to be pressed to eyes and every one aboard to ask who the tall girl was with the glorious voice and if she was to sing at ship's concert?

Ernestine shrugged her shoulders as the song ended

THE GRAY ANGELS

and Thurley, abashed at the furore, sank down in her steamer chair. Harsh tug whistles took up the burden of noise.

"You'll learn not to waste your songs," was all Ernestine said.

CHAPTER XX

Thurley's début was the night of November sixteenth, nor was it *Marguerite* as she fondly hoped but as *Rosina* in "The Barber of Seville," the rôle which she had so often sung during her lessons with Hobart and in which she felt scant interest.

Returning with breathless memories of the beloved Old World as skilfully shown her by her famous couriers, Thurley had waited with equal breathlessness to find Bliss Hobart who had not sent her so much as a penny post card during her weeks abroad.

She found him keen, alert, the personification of energy but as noncommittal as to his summer as the sphinx, annoyed at some of Thurley's mistakes, a hint of nervousness at daring to bring her out so soon — in short, a taskmaster with scant time for jokes or confidences. Indeed, Thurley found herself snubbed by the entire family; they had their parties without her, explaining that she needed her time for study and preparation. Even Miss Clergy, who was refreshed from her summer, became a mild sort of "goader-on." As the hour for her triumph drew near, she was irritable and impatient if Thurley wandered away for a walk, was five minutes late or said her headache prevented a lesson.

It was annoying to have a grownup, cynical world suddenly center its interest on Thurley, the wild-rose Thurley who had basked in the Old-World beauties, responding to French vivacity, "toning in," as Collin said, to the mellowed charms of Spain and feeling at home directly

THE GRAY ANGELS

upon reaching London. Thurley longed to tarry on in Europe a year, she had told Ernestine.

"It makes me feel unprepared; I see how very new and crude I am." But Ernestine had planned their schedule without thought as to Thurley's wishes, so on they went with Thurley learning how to travel and speak her French, to dress, to practise all the things the social secretary had labored to impart. She sent back impracticable trifles to the inhabitants of the Fincherie, writing to Miss Clergy dutifully, and mentally writing whole volumes to Bliss Hobart yet seldom mentioning his name aloud.

So passed her summer. And after the weeks of preparation there came a reaction, a bored languor, indifference to her success. Dreams seemed dead and visions vanished; the girl Thurley who had exchanged love for a career was some one else; surely, she had never heard tell of her. At the present moment she was in a veritable squirrel cage, racing after what seemed unattainable fame; she had so many persons to suit, so many persons waited to hear and criticize her and yet there was only one person whom she really wished to please. He had told her quite forcibly,

"As soon as you are nicely launched, Thurley, I've a contralto from Argentine whom Baxter has in tow — stocky build and will have to bant, but she has an organlike voice and can do wonders in Wagner — only she'll take time which, thank fortune, you did not."

This Thurley took as a personal expression of relief and she went away more bored and numbed than ever, thoroughly insolent to all who crossed her path that day. Ernestine herself could not have achieved it better.

There was the introduction to the stage itself and her future associates. Thurley thanked heaven for blasé

THE GRAY ANGELS

indifference at that time. She conducted herself at rehearsals with the poise of a diplomat and when she sang the impassioned love scene in the singing lesson of "The Barber of Seville" she almost laughed at the famous tenor who irritably accepted this rôle with a "so-great-nobody," as he mockingly informed Thurley, rushing off to meet his last affinity and be properly comforted.

She began to see the truth of Lissa's prophecy regarding the life of opera singers. Yet this anesthesia of indifference spared her harsh emotions or critical judgments. She was merely keeping her pledge, she told herself night after night when she was finally alone with her thoughts.

All of which won her the title of conceited and spoiled and certain to fail. Bliss Hobart saw her ruse and kept his own counsel; Miss Clergy thought it her eternal triumph over personal affection and whispered to Thurley of her satisfaction. And when the great night of nights came and Thurley, as unconcerned as if she were at the old meeting house on a Sunday morning, stood and accepted curtain calls and baskets of flowers, trying not to remember the tenor's repeated comment, "You so-great-nobody, you been drinking witches' broth,"—Thurley knew she had succeeded. Her début was ended. Hereafter she was free to command her own life—life was really beginning for her anew, since it had temporarily stopped the day she left the Corners and these strange people had lived it for her in a vicarious fashion. Now that she had won fame—with the loss of love—she had won freedom and she was Thurley Precore, prima donna!

After the last act, when Thurley's dressing-room was a buzz of animated conversation and the scent of the flowers almost sickish, when her new maid fluttered nerv-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ously about and Bliss Hobart came in to say, "I knew you would — so there's nothing to exclaim about, is there?" — and all the sisters of the press clamored for "a word," with others crowding about and looking properly animated and delighted, Miss Clergy whispered,

"My darling, how proud I am," and Thurley recoiled, she knew not why.

"A finer bridegroom than Dan Birge," the ghost-lady was murmuring, "fame! He is the finest bridegroom of all — fame, Thurley — and I'm so proud of you!"

Naturally there was a "party" which Thurley actually dreaded since she felt she could not yet assert her independence. She was like a gay young eaglet chained and longing to soar where she would! Yet she must sit quietly and be praised and petted, the object of excessive sentiments, just as family birthday dinners are a signal for numberless indulgences. Thurley was eager to have done with the unusual, to live as she wished to live.

That first opera was a distinct blur, just as the rehearsals were blurs as soon as they ended. She realized she had jeopardized her liberty in a psychic fashion and given her word to certain things. She had finally served her apprenticeship and was now liberated. Why, she had sung *Rosina* just as she had often sung lullabies to tired children or for Philena. Stupid world — God gave her a voice as He did brown hair and blue eyes, to herself belonged no credit. Yet here they sat about Bliss Hobart's elegant supper table — Ernestine in her blue and gold and leopard skin gown and Caleb beside her, Lissa in startling cerise and jet trying to call Thurley "my darling child" and honeycomb her jealousy of Mark who ogled her in silly fashion. There was Miss Clergy, the real perpetrator of it all, who kept staring at her

THE GRAY ANGELS

protégée in almost rude fashion, trying to realize that she had finally achieved her revenge! That was food and drink enough. Bliss Hobart was at Thurley's right hand, a manager at her left; there were some critics and society satellites who had succeeded in being invited; Sam Sparling appeared with a girl on each arm, as he flippantly explained; while Thurley was a radiant but indifferent goddess, "the yellow peril," according to Caleb's description, in her brocaded frock with trimmings of silver. So they drank her health and sang her praises and all the time the wild-rose part of her laughed at them because she had not done her best nor anything to her mind which was unusual. In a different fashion, she had merely "sung for her supper" as she had once done in Birge's Corners!

When she reached the hotel, Miss Clergy wanted to talk and gloat, in truth, over the evening's event.

But Thurley shook her head. "I'm tired; even night-ingales do nest," she said, picking up some letters.

They were mostly begging for trade from modistes and milliners but one in a scraggling writing was post-marked "Birge's Corners."

Thurley opened it. After a moment she said in an even voice, "They are well and Ali Baba has made a new stormshed for the front. . . . Dan and Lorraine were married two days ago." Then she went into her room, blowing Miss Clergy a hypocritical kiss.

She was ashamed, as she lay down to sleep, that instead of thinking of her newly acquired freedom and success she was envying Dan Birge and Lorraine. Not even the sob sisters of the press would have guessed what the new and incomparable prima donna thought on the night of her début. It concerned neither her throat troubles nor her complexion, her possible suitors nor her

THE GRAY ANGELS

coming wealth. But the question asked itself time without end: "Is it better to spoil one's youth than to do nothing with it?"

That same evening Dan and Lorraine, ill at ease in their overpowering hotel suite eight squares away from Thurley's hotel, had faced somewhat the same query. For they had come to New York directly following their wedding to spend a restless day with Thurley's memory pursuing them like a ghost.

Then Lorraine dared to voice the matter. "The paper says Thurley will sing to-night," she ventured.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go," Dan answered.

They dropped the subject and spoke of the bromidic details concerning the wedding gifts, what to do with duplicates and the color of the living-room tapestry suite and the beauty of the Queen Anne walnut dining room furnishings which every one said were in better taste than mahogany, the new house with the wonderful fixtures, the electric plugs for lamps, the revolving ice box, the white range, the pergola and sun parlor and the iron deer which was ordered but not yet arrived. How happy two young mortals could have been! Besides, there was the butler's pantry — heaven knows why it was dubbed butler's pantry in the Corners — and the garage with a washing rack, if you please! Then there was the wedding itself — a proper chrysanthemum wedding with three bridesmaids, a matron of honor and a ringbearer. Lorraine's father had married them — "so sweet" as every one agreed — and the church was a bower of blossoms while the wedding cake was in white boxes with the initials of the bride and groom entwined in gold. Lorraine's wardrobe had been the only meagre thing and that, Dan generously said, would soon be

THE GRAY ANGELS

remedied. He had ordered a shower of orchids for her to carry and given her a sunburst of diamonds, while her wedding ring broke all Birge's Corners' precedents, for it was a platinum circlet dotted with diamonds. The Corners did not know whether or not to approve this last. It was "going some," the younger generation said, and the recently married girls boasting of plain and a trifle ponderous gold bands said that they wouldn't feel respectably married with that funny kind of a ring, but then Lorraine's father being a minister and every one present at the church, they supposed it was all right — every one had her own ideas.

Lorraine wore a new dress to the opera, one she had bought that morning. Not yet accustomed to her husband's generosity, she had visited a second-rate shop to obtain the slimy blossom pink silk with cheap trimming. She had only her travelling coat of dark wool for a wrap and a stupid hat breathing of home millinery.

She knew Dan was not pleased. As she looked at him in his tuxedo she realized that she was not yet "used to being rich"; she would buy the goods for dresses and make them herself, she could then have so many more.

"Will I do for to-night?" she asked timidly, knowing the contrast between herself and Thurley would be cruelly unfair. She winced from it as any woman would wince from having to sit beside the man she loved while he watched the woman of his heart appear in beautiful triumph! Besides, Lorraine had never been to a theater, her father not approving; she was nervous lest she make some embarrassing *faux pas*.

"Yes, no one knows us in New York," he said carelessly.

Then they watched Thurley in all her loveliness come on the stage in her *Rosina* costume of red, yellow and

THE GRAY ANGELS

black lace. Lorraine glanced at Dan as Thurley sang and triumphed and sang again and triumphed more and the people near them kept asking who she was. Lorraine, with her pitiful bargain frock, her unpowdered face and awkward bonnet, knew that a shadow had fallen between Dan and herself — Thurley's shadow — no longer a wild rose, generous and kindly of heart, but a prima donna, the woman that Dan would love hopelessly forever and a day.

She applauded Thurley generously, turning her wistful face to Dan's to say, "She is lovely, isn't she?" But Lorraine knew that not even the new house with its furnishings nor her wedding ring nor the diamond sunburst could still all the pain of knowing that she had been "married for spite"; she might be the most tender wife and excellent housekeeper in the world yet she was not Thurley, lovely, tyrannical! And as she watched the opera with Thurley its dominating note and Dan's moody face now defiant, now almost glad, she recalled the superstition about women who married Birge men,— meek little creatures they were who lived only long enough to bear a son and then smiled contentedly and were snuffed out into the unknown!

CHAPTER XXI

At first fame was good to have, there was no mistaking it. For Thurley achieved delightful freedom by the magic of her success. She began to do all she had planned during her novice period, to try this or that sort of costume, to give "affairs," if you please; she cultivated a hobby and a "phobia" and acquired a smart wire-haired terrier called "Taffy" whose picture was featured in all the leading newspapers and musical journals.

It did not take her long to readjust herself to this new life. Older, tired persons who had played godmother and godfather to her during her apprenticeship watched her in amusement. Not that Thurley ceased to apply herself to work; she was untiring in her efforts, for she felt she would never want to stop learning new and more difficult things. Nor did she stop knowing any one save those who could be of use to her. Instead there was exhibited a refreshing democracy of spirit which governed her likes and dislikes.

Bliss told Caleb, "She's a pleasant little Trojan and one can see at a glance, save for amusing whims, she is as reliable as a grandfather's clock." And he told Thurley, who hovered about hoping for some personal understanding or praise,

"Just be sincere and everything else trues up — and don't grow plump like Lissa, because banting is an awful bugbear."

At which Thurley tossed her newly laurel-crowned

THE GRAY ANGELS

head and determined to try artifice to make him pay her attention. After all, these fads and fashions were merely antidotes to make her forget the thing she craved foremost — Bliss Hobart's real friendship. So she ordered lavishly of whatsoever she chose, moving without delay into an apartment, with Miss Clergy tottering contentedly after. It was a personal triumph for Miss Clergy; with Thurley it was only the natural result of having been born a singer.

"I have my own ideas for my apartment," she told Ernestine with patronage, even waving aside Lissa's suggestions for a "love of a boudoir — just the place for proposals" and returning Mark's offering of a gilt mirror because it did not harmonize with her color scheme!

"Let her play away, she'll tire of it," Sam Sparling said indulgently, when Polly dropped in at the theater to recount Thurley's latest exploit, the purchase of antique Egyptian jewelry which she was to wear in "Aïda."

"Have you seen her apartments?" asked Polly. "Not like Thurley at all. I associate her with real mahogany and open fireplaces — rose-garden things."

"I'll blow up that way to-morrow afternoon," Sam promised.

Which he did — only to be amazed himself at the effect Thurley had managed to create. Her living room had a blue floor, a blue arch and lapis lazuli colored pedestals. There was a turquoise satin fire screen, a globe of blue Bristol glass and the walls and ceilings were done in rich, silver leaf paper with impossible gilt furniture set at futurist angles throughout the apartment. Apricot linen curtains threw a strange, mellow glow on the black dining-room, the walls being brocaded black velvet with red alabaster bowls on tripods and a riotous futurist frieze running about the room. There

THE GRAY ANGELS

were side tables of audacious rose-red marble and the dining table and chairs were polished ebony while an onyx-like mantel boasted of silver bowls heaped with glass colored fruits.

Sam, who knew no restraint, came rapping boldly at the door of Thurley's own room, after an astonished stroll through the apartment.

A *chic* maid opened the door with the properly startled expression always registered in Caleb's novels.

"I say, Thurley, you've done yourself proud," Sam lounged in the doorway to view the white Empire furniture with elaborate gold scroll, the blue velvet hangings, the cabinet of slippers and hair ornaments arranged, no one knew why, not even Thurley herself, as if for display.

Thurley, who was preparing to take dinner at the Hotel Particular with half a dozen new and decidedly unconventional creatures, tried to look indignant.

"You're a monster," she said as she shook her finger at him in imitation of Lissa. At which Sam burst out laughing and vowed he would have her for his leading lady no matter if he had to send Bliss flying off yon cliff.

"You ridiculous child," spoiling her dignity completely, "who in the world started you to shake fingers in old beaux' faces? And dressing like the adventuress in 'Lights o' London'? Do put on your rumpled blue serge and let's go for a drive!"

Thurley swept by him in indignation, Sam following and side-stepping her train. She wore a band of black jet in her carefully dressed hair and a gown of black to match, over which was a long cape of unspotted ermine.

She stood beside the piano to draw on her gloves. "It isn't fair to scold in front of a new maid," she said, "and contradict me or not, Sam, I am grown up. I can't

THE GRAY ANGELS

go about like a flapper or keep on living in a hotel."

"What does Miss Clergy say?" Sam balanced himself first on his toes and then sank back on his heels.

"She smiles, nods, agrees and never wants me to repay her. But, joy of joys, I can. For I'm going to be rich — really rich and I'm young; I have years in which to dash about without a thought as to rest or digestion. Don't you approve?" She finished buttoning her gloves and proceeded to open a florist's box critically to take notice of a corsage of yellow tea roses.

"Mark does send such ultra things," she complained languidly. At which Sam Sparling nearly upset himself by overbalancing and then came up to take hold of her shoulders as if she were a small boy in need of a trouncing.

"Young lady, let an old beau give a word of advice. They say a word to the wise is sufficient and you were, formerly, wise and apple-cheeked and delicious. We all adored you. To-day I feel I ought to call you Lady Vere de Vere and tuck intriguing notes in that corsage, all that sort of thing . . . my dear, play away, for it's not to be wondered at, but don't, oh, don't, Thurley, let it supersede the real you. I remember Ernestine Christian had a whirl at it when she first came into prominence. Dear yes, jewels and furs that every woman envied — flirtations — a bit psychological were her flirtations as I remember; she particularly went in for Hindu poets and consuls. But flirtations, nevertheless! Then she used to give all manner of absurd parties — there was one in London that laid me up a fortnight. It began with ice cream and cordials and ended with the Lord Mayor of London's own turtle soup — had it sent over by gold braided beadles and so on. You had to eat each course a different spot. You were kept on the move, so to

THE GRAY ANGELS

speaking. I remember munching my alligator pear somewhere near the Tower of London, only to be whisked off to Whitechapel to be set up directly with the neatest sort of a game plate! Well, she tired of playing that way and one day she appeared at my dressing room in a rough tweed suit and a felt hat saying,

“ ‘Sam, I’ve buttered buns in this hamper and pale, schoolboy sherry. Let’s walk until we’re so hungry that we’ll sit down and eat like beggars — and I can make a proper confession of what a fool I’ve been!’ ”

Thurley tried not to laugh and succeeded in commanding an unbecoming frown. “Well, you didn’t try to restrain her,” she insisted.

“Ernestine is a different type. I’m afraid you wouldn’t look at mere Hindu poets or consuls.”

“What of yourself?”

“Hands up, I confess. I had a passion for coaching tours and those horrible alderman-like banquets. I seemed to be tremendously popular with the buds — I was cad enough to keep all their letters for a long time. When they began to have grandchildren send me notes saying, ‘Granny says to ask if you remember the time you played *Romeo* and so and so’ — I stopped being such a great house, ordered health-last shoes and got a line on the really reliable sanitariums. But you, Thurley,” — The old-beau aspect of himself seemed dimmed; he appeared a fatherly old gentleman rich in experience and therefore wise in judgment. She felt like a naughty child who has been discovered while parading in her mother’s finery. She could not have told why, but she felt artificial, as if she should be on the stage of the opera house singing her heart away in some lavish rôle — as *Violetta* in “*Traviata*” for instance — but not as Thurley Precore!

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You'd even make me believe there was no Santa Claus," she protested, the actress in her rallying to her support. "Don't tell me to don a pinafore and become interested in botany! It's such fun to play — and so new; none of you seem to realize that." Here she trailed off into silence, busy with her own thoughts, Mark's corsage slipping from her fingers.

She was remembering Dan and Lorraine and the day the child Thurley and Philena pledged to be missionaries, the advent into the Clergy mansion as a madcap mischief, the singing in Betsey's parlor that momentous June day, the quarrel with Dan, the wonderful journey to the city with the ghost-lady, then Bliss . . . here the thoughts ended and she found herself thanking Sam for returning her corsage.

"As for this sort of thing," the old actor finished, pointing at the corsage, "you'll have many of them — but choose wisely and for all time. Don't waste time on worthless phantoms; remember 'To-morrow feeds on yesterday.' Even if you fancy you are merely playing at being a 'grand lady,' and that you yourself are unspoiled and truly great, think of the bon mot: 'Imitation is sincerest flattery,' and do not ape Lissa any more than you can help."

"None of you understand," she cried, rebelliously. "I shall do as I wish and live as I choose — as you have all done."

"Look at us and take warning," ended Sam promptly. "Well, if you get crowded to the wall, call on me. I'll be about." After this he went on his way undecided whether or not merely to admire Thurley as another dear charmer on whom his heart had undeniably been frittered away or to take her seriously as if she were a hope-to-die ward given into his guardianship.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Meanwhile, Thurley went on to the dinner party remembering Sam's audacity with annoyance intermingled with delight. There was and always will be to every woman, if she is honest, a rare charm in being treated as a little girl. White-haired matrons delight in being named "girl" and being told by some one a trifle whiter of hair and more numerous of birthdays: "My child, what in the world are you dreaming of?" It is a harmless notion with which every woman is endowed.

Thurley was born more or less of a woman, so that Sam's attitude appealed to her. But the peacock which is also in all women and the love of domination, remnant of glorious idol worship, made her reject his halfway offered protectorship.

It was wonderful to dress in rich fashion, to have Mark take her to some bohemian table d'hôte — like that of the Petispas Sisters — to know she would be the handsomest and best-dressed person there and that Lissa was helplessly furious at Mark's new object of adoration, yet obliged to smile instead of snarl in Thurley's presence. It was fun to read letters from unknown admirers, to have schoolgirls with vast ambitions and opinions of their abilities appeal to her, as well as embryo tenors from small towns who only needed a gracious, sisterly hand to guide them, and press agents out of a job who were capable of the greatest scheme for procuring public interest that ever alarm-clocked! Thurley was just realizing the parasites, so-called artistic, who beg, steal or demand their living from those who really work and earn one. She was beginning to classify the large army of restless rebel women who really delude themselves into believing they have a mission in life, badgering all those who simply do the work they were intended for. These women interested Thurley. She regarded them

THE GRAY ANGELS

as one views a new member of the zoo, poking sticks at them through the bars when the guard is not alert.

She had listened to these creatures tell their woes with childish audacity; she liked their superlative mode of expression rendering their case hopelessly weak and insincere, she was amused by the comic opera fashion in which they dressed or the masculine over-emphasis in costume details. There were women of the pale, willowy type — “misunderstood” was their slogan. There were the bold, aggressive women who despised sentiment and who longed to prove to men that they were truly a non-essential race, who grew so enthusiastic over what they could do for one Thurley Precore as her advance agent, companion, secretary and so on that Thurley fully expected them to bark or walk up the wall, as she told Ernestine. There were women of the dreamy, neurotic type who never mentioned mother back in Oshkosh still cooking “three squares a day” for her houseful of boarders in order that Myrtle or Poincianna might have a winter in New York in which to study design! Design was right — but not as mother fancied it was!

Oftentimes Thurley felt she must stop playing a part — mischievous young person! — and say to these misguided rebel-dolls that they were fortunate in having just plain folks, to have any one really belonging to them — a vista of forbidden joys would open before her blue eyes as these “hysterical hikers,” as Bliss Hobart had named them, told her of how they had come away from the sordid, uninteresting atmosphere which strangled their inner selves and they were willing to go hungry — all the great ones had gone hungry — to deny the fleshpots if they might only achieve — might win the laurel! After the large flow of language when called upon to demon-

THE GRAY ANGELS

strate their abilities, they would warble in a reedy soprano:

The vi-o-let loves the pans-y
FOR — the robin told me so-o-o-

Or else they would use a coal-bin contralto to inform Thurley all about the Lost Chord and ask if they did not remind her of Clara Butts!

It was a merry life, because Thurley had not reached the stage of acknowledging that she had nerves. She revelled in this court of appeals from which the others fled.

Caleb had reached the neurasthenic stage where he wanted a periscope attached to his porch so he could spot approaching authors laden with a manuscript. Every time a young author did brave the portcullis and obtain an audience, only to ask Caleb if there really was not everything in a name — editors were so mean, anyhow, and every one said so, and if Caleb would permit his novel, which every one said was *the* American novel, too, to be printed under Caleb's name and thus play a roaring joke on these haughty and unfair editors, why, he would go fifty-fifty on the royalties — every time this happened to Caleb, he promptly disappeared on a champagne debauch and refused to express any penitence whatsoever concerning it!

Or if Collin was held up by a young woman with a badly powdered nose and a thatch of flaxen hair hiding all her features save the nose and was asked if she could not be his inspiration, Collin lost no time in rewarding himself for the ordeal. His bags were packed, and his motor was at the gate, even if the president of a steel trust was due for a portrait sitting. Away he flew over hill and

THE GRAY ANGELS

dale like a startled rabbit, reaching some rural inn where art consisted of framed lithographs, and here he lay in hiding until his disposition had sufficiently recovered to allow his return as a smiling, bow-tie-waving artist, brush poised for action!

Therefore the family regarded Thurley's liking for the onslaught of hysterical hikers as a sort of puppy soap-chewing-and-distemper stage.

"Let it run its course, they all do," Hobart said when it was reported to him. "She'll grow weary of auto-graphing photographs and of having every would-be genius from the wilds of Oregon try to crowd into a basket and land on her doorstep — a songbird foundling cuckooing its misunderstood little life!"

There was something about these women which faintly roused the reformer in Thurley. They were simply out of step, she insisted, her own little feet always marching to the bandwagon without question. They needed to be shown the inspiration which can be gained from mediocrity. Although they were humorous and a trifle pathetic, they were dangerous, to Thurley's mind.

"What havoc they could raise!" she said to Hobart one afternoon. "They would be capable of playing gnome at sane and settled doorways and calling, 'Leave your tasks — come out — come out,' and a great many would follow them. They are seething with discontent and they have the determination which keeps them going, yet they do not tell themselves the truth; they magnify home wrongs and future glories and their own possibilities. And I think," she added with a frank smile, "they have either never been loved by any one or else loved some one who did not love them. It's a form of romantic insanity which causes them to denounce love when all the while they crave it — insane persons always turn on

THE GRAY ANGELS

the ones who love them best. So these dear, queer girls and women, trying to avoid routine work and home folks, just need to have Cupid take their telephone number and he could accomplish the miracle of miracles."

Chuckling, Hobart had taken his leave. The next afternoon he surprised Thurley with a call, handing her a bouquet of charming wine-colored, white-specked blossoms surrounded by cool fern.

She did not thank him; instead she flushed and the blue eyes grew two shades deeper blue.

"I thought you'd be terribly set up over an old-fashioned 'bow pot.'" Hobart was rather mystified.

"I am; you chose cleverly." Thurley hated herself for betraying displeasure.

"Why don't you like Early Morning Brides? They used to be my mother's favorite; she sent to America for seed and we had one walk lined with them." Hobart looked like the small boy who had blundered into delivering the love note to the green grocer and the green grocer's order to the loved one!

Thurley's face had cleared magically. "Oh, is that the name you know them by?" dimples twinkling in her cheeks. "I — I thought it something else."

"What?" determined to solve the mystery.

"A silly name, very likely I'm wrong — anyway, you're a dear and here they go into my best vase and on to my best table!"

Later in the day Hobart took time to retrace his steps to the old florist. He asked if Early Morning Brides had ever been known by another name.

"Well, some do call 'em Old Maids' Pincushion," the man told him, "but I'm one as has no liking for the name!"

CHAPTER XXII

During the winter Thurley tired of the hysterical hikers, since they increased in number. They did not bother with such persons as Lissa or Mark or Polly. And Hobart, who was acknowledged to be the personification of public opinion, was immune from the pest. By degrees Thurley realized why Lissa was not bothered — because Lissa herself was a hysterical hiker developed to the stage of a near-genius; such transformations are too often wrought these days. Like recognizing like, she was severely let alone. As for Mark — when Thurley thought of him she found herself sitting down in a nearby chair, deaf to the world about her. There was no denying that if Lissa's theories regarding artists' privileges were true and her theories of life ethical, her exponent of them, Mark, was a sorry example. Mark was rapidly becoming a selfish neurasthenic; his better self died hard, it is true, but dying it was. Although the actress part of Thurley delighted in the unwise excitement of a flirtation with some one else's property, the real Thurley looked askance at the changes being swiftly wrought in the boy, his over-emphasis on petty detail concerning his comfort, his ill humor at minor happenings which were not as he had wished, his sluggishness regarding work — the critics began to hint he was too bulky of figure. More and more did he bask in Lissa's salon, drink and eat unwisely, taking her raggings about the "so-great-nobody" with humorous unconcern, quite positive of his own power to fascinate and offset Lissa's tempers.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Foppish dress, lack of humdrum duties, home ties — there had been an aunt, Thurley learned, who had raised him and of whom he was now ashamed. She lived meekly retired in the little white house in Connecticut and Mark sent her money, the easiest thing in the world to send, and her name was never mentioned. His press agent had a most fetching story about his mother's being a Turkish girl who escaped from a harem and his father a Grecian nobleman and Mark's having been educated in Moscow and Berlin, whereas, in the real heart of the man, there was the spirit which could be reverent and proud of his aunt's toilworn hands with prominent purplish veins and knotted fingers, of the simple white house and the everyday living which had given him the constitution to endure the not-everyday living he now embraced.

When Thurley's press agent had woven similar romances concerning herself, she refused to let them appear, saying with a simplicity worthy of an older, wiser woman, "I am Thurley Precore, an American. You may tell of the box-car wagon and those funny things of my childhood and my decision not to marry but have a career, but please do not tell what is an untruth," at which the press agent had elaborated these details until they were scarcely to be recognized and printed the story surrounded by a string of heartbroken and despairing bachelors of every type who were wailing that life meant nothing as long as this new *diva* had chosen a career instead of love.

One March afternoon, after Thurley had created a new furore as *Senta* in "The Flying Dutchman," her social engagements crowding her with a vengeance, three things occurred the same muggy, windy day which impressed themselves mightily on her mind.

THE GRAY ANGELS

She had had Mark in for tea, clandestinely, since Lissa was giving a musical and had invited both of them. Miss Clergy had gone for her usual drive and Thurley had donned corn-colored silk with silver trimmings and a new set of cameo jewelry to exercise her powers of fascination.

Ernestine was on tour and Polly Harris had temporarily disappeared from the horizon, particularly Thurley's, because the latter had innocently had the bad taste to try to help her openly. Collin was in Washington to paint the president's portrait and Caleb in Europe rapidly burning up the earnings of his last year's book.

The opera season was near completion and Thurley and Miss Clergy were casting about where to spend the summer, the press agents urging some unusual spot which should furnish them with autumn copy — a submarine boat or the Sahara desert! The naming of a cigar for her and an invitation to sing at the dedication of a great church had been the events of the week while banners up and down Fifth Avenue announced that she had made a record of her "Aïda" aria, "*O, ciel assuerri*" for a prominent talking machine company. As the loveliest and youngest singer of her day, with Europe flirting with her managers to hear her and America plying her with dollars to keep her at home, Thurley wondered how it would seem to have some new pink-and-white-cheeked girl with an even greater voice than hers, bluer eyes and brighter hair, come slipping into the opera field as she had done. She wondered if she could be half as gracious as these tired-faced men and women who welcomed and hated and pitied her all in one!

She glanced sideways in a glass and added mentally,

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You've a long road ahead, anyway," while Mark droned on in impossible platitudes.

A maid brought a card and Thurley read the name, Hortense Quinby. Underneath was written, "Please see me, very vital."

"Run along, Mark," she commanded. "You've told pretty fibs long enough. Do go to Lissa's recital. You must stop travelling on such thin ice as long as you are determined to be a slug."

"That's no fair." Mark tried to take her hands but she drew away.

"How do you like these cameos?" she demanded.

"Let me get you lovelier things. There ought to be jewels just for you and no one else — a Thurley design in pale gold —"

"Spare me! There is a front-laced Precore corset, a Thurley ginger-ale and a Thurley Precore perfecto cigar, as well as a Thurley perfume and vanishing cream — why torture me any further?"

"Because I like you. I don't know why I don't say love you," his handsome face flushing, "but you're not the sort to say that to unless a chap has earned the right. How a pair of eyes can change everything one has made up his mind to say!"

"I'll cover them with my hands," she teased.

"No, they'd shine through at me — true blue always does. So I'll just say like — and make you admit you return the sentiment. If it's only liking each other, Thurley, there's no harm!"

"I like you, but I don't approve of you," she admitted, "and I'd rather you didn't come to see me when you ought to be with Lissa."

"If she had some one she liked better than me, she

THE GRAY ANGELS

would not remember such a word as loyalty," he began impulsively.

"No fair — run along and do take some exercises. You look aldermanic."

Reluctantly, he rose. "Why see every stray female from nowhere? I used to when I took life and art seriously. It grew to be a bore and I never see any one now. Even if the Jap does steal more than his wages, I keep him because he knows how never to open the door for any one but the laundry and the liquor agents."

"I see them because it is a novelty, as people see me because I am one," she said soberly. "Some day the people and I will stop both customs. . . . Good-by, Mark — my apologies to Lissa and I shall see her soon."

Hortense Quinby proved to be a "hysterical hiker" — one concluded that from her pale, rather quick face and over-severe mode of hair-dressing. She had an untrimmed floppy hat, a bright green walking suit that had seen better days and a severe, gentlemanly cravat throttling her chin. There was an attempt to have a professional air by carrying a leather portfolio, but one could not have told whether she was a travelling manicure or secretary to a professor on Egyptology!

She was not a young woman nor was she middle-aged; perhaps the look of discontent in her dark eyes shadowed her really admirable features. She lost no time in making her wants known; one could see that she had been met with many rebuffs in similar situations and so, like the door to door canvasser she had learned to say the most in the least time!

"Miss Precore," she began in her tense voice, artificially accented here and there with a dash of pseudo-New York, "I am Hortense Quinby, I live in Green-

THE GRAY ANGELS

wich Village, and perhaps I should say I *starve* in Greenwich Village. I have watched your rise into fame, not with envy but with admiration and respect. You are young, beautiful, talented; you have the world in the palm of your little hand. I do not ask you to be anything unreasonable — but I do implore your help. Let me become essential to you in some capacity — a secretary, a housekeeper, a maid — I hold myself above no office if it concerns the right person. I play accompaniments fairly well — not as well as you would wish for public appearances but for your practice-hour. I am one of those who have failed,” here a deep-seated sigh. “I came from a small town in the middle part of the state about ten years ago; every one thought I had great literary ability as well as musical. But there was no one to help me get across — perhaps when one’s talents are divided one is to be pitied.”

She said all this, scarcely pausing. Now she stopped to breathe.

“Really, Miss Quinby, I have every one I need,” Thurley said gently.

“But I have not,” returned Miss Quinby to her amazement. “Be generous, lovely young thing, be generous to us who have failed. I am not asking for fame — merely to become associated with it.” She held out her hands dramatically. “Do not send me back to be ground down again!”

“I don’t need you,” Thurley protested, most perturbed.

“I need you. My life cannot be lived as are thousands of women’s lives, bounded by the price of calico and two weeks’ vacation in a lake cottage. I have a soul above pots and pans — a fearless soul, capable of enduring all things to achieve my aim. Let me be your

THE GRAY ANGELS

inspiration — you think I could not? ” The restless eyes were dangerous and somewhat vindictive.

Miss Quinby proceeded to enumerate her abilities and the capacities in which she had served. As nearly as Thurley could understand a comic opera singer stranded in Miss Quinby's home town had heard her sing and idly encouraged the girl. Some one financed the comic opera singer on to New York and she thought no more of the incident. Not so with Hortense Quinby. From the moment she had been told she had “ a voice ” and a “ future ” and “ get out of this hole, my dear ”— everything in her present scheme of things had been abandoned. She came to New York only to find the opera singer absorbed in her own difficulties and to battle alone with her “ voice ” and her “ future ” and her having left “ the dreadful hole.”

She had tried magazine work; rejection slips enough to have papered the boarding house were the result. She had, sadly enough, a glimmer of the divine spark which led her on a madcap chase during which the best years of girlhood were wasted. She became socialist and follower of long-haired, East Side gentlemen's magazines which the authorities usually made a bonfire of, locking up the long-haired gentlemen. She was prominent in visiting them in the Tombs and giving out dangerous statements to the press, in hopes, really, of being locked up herself and thus appearing as a martyr. There are so many would-be martyrs, self-inflicted benefactors of the public. But it is sometimes as hard work to gain persecution and as futile as the task of the men who are paid seven dollars a day to trace the history of seven cents. So Hortense Quinby had found it. No one listened to her nor locked her up and admitted sob sisters to write down her ravings in the good old-fashioned dot-and-asterisk

THE GRAY ANGELS

style. But, great Beatrice Fairfax, this was not all wherein she had suffered! Thurley was, by turns, amused, bored, thoughtful and finally mentally depressed as the recital of the past flowed on in reels.

She had started a paper herself, only to have it fail in a dismal way. There was not enough of danger in it to have the postal authorities take the matter up. She had lived among the East Side fanatics, had been second housemaid in a rich New Yorker's family, hoping to observe the scandals of the leisure class and publish them later on. Evidently, she had been unable to divulge glorious scandals, she had a cast off hat of one of the daughters of the family, a decent sort of room and better food than Greenwich Village had offered and the third day she was kindly dismissed for general lack of qualifications. She had tried playing accompaniments, had done china painting, suped in Broadway comedies, had done everything that a woman troubled by a "liberated soul" could do and yet she had not made herself invaluable to any one really worth the while. She wanted to attach herself to Thurley, a sort of figurative third-rail affair, the inspiration and strength of Thurley's youthful self.

Thurley, bewildered from the outpouring and wishing some one would come and spirit her away, weakly said she could come in to take some dictation for correspondence once a week or do other minor tasks.

"Until I prove myself essential," insisted Miss Quinby. "When that day comes —"

At which Thurley named a day and hour and wearily rang the bell to have her shown out.

Hortense Quinby's visit left her with a headache and no zest for her supper. The opera that night was to be "The Magic Flute," and Thurley was at her best as *Pamina*. She loved the rôle and rehearsals had pro-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ceeded in excellent fashion. But the interview with Hor-tense had given her a fearful sense as to her own future. Would she, in turn, become furtive, restless, eager to seize upon some other new and lovely creature, with a sort of vampirish desire to have youth by feeding on youth?

She went to her room without ringing for her maid and slipped out of her brilliant afternoon frock. She rum-maged in her clothes room crowded with new gorgeous-ness until she found a rough tweed suit and a boyish hat. Taking a swagger stick and whistling for Taffy, she wil-fully disappeared out of the apartment at just the hour her schedule called for rest, facial massage and toasted wafers with hot milk!

It was rainy, and the air was unnaturally warm, the wind having died down. Her throat doctor would have come after her in an ambulance had he known she was sauntering along the river drive, pausing to look at the blinking lights on the boats or at the dark, beautiful uncertainty of what lay on the other shore.

Was she beginning to have nerves? Thurley spoke sharply to Taffy, warning him to heel her or she would disown him. Nerves! She who had never in her life been prey to so much as a headache, who had laughed at throat washes and precaution against eye strain, who audaciously cracked nuts with her firm, white teeth and declared she did not know how it would feel to be even a trifle indisposed!

Not the strain of training nor the début, the unnatural life of the opera stage nor the atmosphere of crowds and tired, jaded artists who knew, too well, how it felt to be muchly indisposed had made such inroads on her Viking-like constitution as this queer woman who bounded in on her coquettish serenity and fairly startled a yes out

THE GRAY ANGELS

of her. Thurley felt trip-hammer pulses beating in her forehead. She wanted to wander on and on until the dark became permanent and the traffic scarce and she was dog-tired as she used to be when she was at the end of one of her tramps with Dan and they sat under a tree to get rested up, kissing each other a shocking number of times . . . strange this woman should so affect her.

She began thinking in irregular fashion, indicative of her tired brain, of the different persons with whom the new life had brought close and necessary contact . . . Madame Coleno, the great Wagnerian contralto, strong and fine by birthright but with the ungovernable temper which caused her to turn on little Edith Hooker, the English girl who was her lyric soprano, slapping her face and tearing at her hair until some one interfered. She wondered if the madhouse would be this famous woman's last abode. Some said she had run amuck through drink, others heartbreak, a few whispered insanity was in the family. Then there was Escola, the silver-throated tenor! She shook her tired head in disapproval. Escola, who was a merciless tyrant, cared for by his wife as if he were an infant in arms and who rewarded her with a new breach of promise suit as a payment! The patient wife, an Italian peasant as every one knew, made no protest, but continued her round of preparing mustard footbaths and making native dishes Escola demanded, lighting her candles before her little shrine for her master's success!

. . . Now it was Dan Ruffio, the bass — what an outcast from society in Birge's Corners he would be, openly defiant of conventions, always storming and blustering about, sneering at him or her who obeyed the law, ridiculing, fond of cruel practical joking of a low calibre, lov-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ing no one save himself, yet appearing on the stage as the most tender of lovers, the gentlest of patriarchs! And when Thurley attended the first supper party given by a famous ballet dancer, she had been genuinely and lastingly shocked at not only the conversation but the manners observed by all,—it was not the gluttony of Lissa's parties that had been in evidence but an almost sinister fashion of wasting food and demanding bizarre, unhealthful dishes.

Nor could she forget Wimple O'Horo, who had made violent love to her and pouted when repulsed! What a wishy-washy, unreal boor he was when one knew him from behind the footlights, what a dashing, light hearted cavalier he appeared when viewed on the other side! Thurley's lips curved in scorn as she recalled his favorite pastime of reading aloud mash notes and the signed names as well. Some said that he conducted a high-brow form of blackmail when he needed extra money with which to gamble.

There had been a director's party where throwing egg-nogs had been the chief sport, regardless of costumes; a hundred and one such incidents and new, distressing personalities kept recurring to Thurley as she stood there, quite sure she was tired of it all, of even her own deliciously decent and attractive way of spending her first earned dollars and making the most of blue eyes, curving scarlet lips and bright brown hair.

She remembered what Polly had told her regarding her future progress.

"There are three steps of becoming truly mundane. First, you buy things in a store. Next, you purchase articles in a shop. Lastly, you acquire treasures in an establishment!"

With a sense of disappointment at having nothing

THE GRAY ANGELS

which she might anticipate, Thurley realized she had reached the last stage. Only yesterday she had "acquired" a tapestry treasure from a haughty "establishment," the proprietor bowing her in and out with formal regard!

She leaned over a stone parapet, gazing at the fog, the occasional rain drops making her cheeks cool and refreshed, although Taffy crouched unwillingly beside her and wondered why this adorable but unreasonable mistress of his walked through mud when her car waited for her signal, to say nothing of his own self being hideously bespotted and, therefore, in line for odious bathing.

Some one jostled near her, looked at her sharply for a moment and then said in an alarmed tone,

"My dear little girl, what a risk on such a night! Not an hour before you're due in your dressing-room — tell me, what is it?"

It was Bliss Hobart in an equally grotesque get-up, a checkered raincoat and hat winning him the title of Mackintosh of Mackintosh.

Thurley turned and held out her hands, the swagger stick falling with an unjust thump on Taffy's long-suffering back.

"I'm so glad — I'm lonesome and queer. I need to be set right," she protested so wistfully that Hobart kept holding on to her hands, the darkness keeping her from spying how tender an expression was in his eyes.

"What's it all about? I've just run out of secrets, so do tell me. Let's walk on, not stand in this damp. Let me see your boots — are they stout enough? Stand under this lamplight until I disprove your fib — ah-ha, they are *not* stout enough. I shall call a cab."

"Please don't. I'll run away and you'll have to drive

THE GRAY ANGELS

Taffy about. I must walk or I cannot sing to-night — I want to walk miles and miles —”

“They’ll miss you and be throwing a scare into Gasoti that you’ve been kidnapped. It’s ‘The Magic Flute,’ too, one of your best . . . please, Thurley, just walk along until you’ve told me the worst and then we’ll get a cab —”

“What of yourself?” she asked, suddenly feeling elated and quite fit.

He halfway unbuttoned his coat, showing an expanse of white shirt bosom. “Full dress for a banquet at which I’m to speak. I took a turn along here to get myself in trim . . . tell me, what about your fancies?”

Thurley’s eyes were like stars. She caught hold of his arm as if he had been Dan and began to talk. It seemed the most wonderful yet natural thing in the world to tell him everything. The harsh critic, the impersonal man of affairs vanished; he was a good pal walking unselfishly in the rain and under such self-sacrificing conditions that it would be an unusual woman who could not furnish him with a complete line of new secrets!

When she finished, having begun with Mark’s flirtation and her own hint of nerves and ending with this Hortense Quinby and the muddle she was in about the morals of the “songbirds,” Hobart said with a jolly laugh that set her nerves quite right,

“When you get jammed, always remember the most delectable sport in the world is to let fools take you for an even greater fool. As I told you many months ago, be yourself and everything swings into line. Come over to-morrow at ten; there are one or two flaws in your ‘Rigoletto’ song, ‘Caro Nome’—didn’t know I kept such close track of some one, did you? . . . Hi, cabby —

THE GRAY ANGELS

yes, no, just the lady and the terrier, the Terror will proceed alone, but twice as happy because he paused before a certain dark outline . . . good-by, to-morrow at ten and, remember, stouter boots the next time it rains."

With a feeling of disappointment that he did not join her, yet exhilarated and impatient for the morning, Thurley leaned back in the cab and hugged the aggrieved Taffy.

She sang so well that night the critics bemoaned the lack of new adjectives with which to do her credit, her dressing-room was crowded with visitors, social leaders who had left their boxes to besiege her with invitations. Miss Clergy sat supreme in a corner of the dressing-room, engrossed in old-style crewel work which she had learned as a girl.

"And no man will ever break your heart," she said in fond delusion.

Thurley vanished. During the entire opera she had thought of the fact that Bliss Hobart really worried because she had not worn stouter boots . . . it was so "comfy" to know some one worried about such things. If only the men who thought ahead about all the little things for a woman were not so universally inclined to forbid a woman's thinking ahead about the big ones. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

When spring convinced Birge's Corners it had come to stay and housewives mended screens and painted porch steps, and indulged in that blight on civilization, house-cleaning, there came a better, finer understanding between Dan and Lorraine.

Since their New York wedding journey with Thurley Precore's début the really great event, there had been a constrained sort of relationship. When two persons admit to themselves they are not happy and it was a mistake to have married, yet are making the best of it and trying to trick the world into thinking them the personification of bliss, the relationship is more hopeless than if each jogs on his own way admitting his discontent and lack of satisfaction. The latter course contains a ray of hope in the fact that systematic deceit and repression have not yet obtained a clutch.

But Dan and Lorraine had returned to the wonderful new house and, in a pathetic, truthful talk, realized that all life stretched before them in unending monotony unless they wished that much dreaded and unusual of happenings in Birge's Corners — especially for a minister's daughter — a divorce!

"Perhaps I did wrong to marry you," Dan said, the first day of their return. "The Birge temper in a new fashion. I wanted to hurt some one else because I was hurt . . . a pretty cheap way to do, wasn't it?"

They were in the living-room where wedding presents were in huddled groups, for Lorraine brooked no interference such as a "settler" to which many brides are

THE GRAY ANGELS

subjected. Everything was shiny new, unbecomingly so; the rugs were scarcely adjusted to the slippery floors, there was an air of dampness because the initial furnace fire was scarcely under headway, price marks were still pasted on the electric fixtures, there was something yet to be done with the landing baseboard as there always is something to be done after one has moved into the supposedly most complete house in the world.

No evidence of family life had been introduced into this new and loveless house which was at once the envy and curiosity of the village. Their trunks were unpacked in the front bedroom; the sun parlor waited for Lorraine's taste in furnishing; a thousand and one details which Dan had dreamed that Thurley would settle with her rapturous enthusiasm now awaited Lorraine's common sense commands. Lorraine suggested nothing of the girl to Dan; she was a woman, narrow in viewpoint and her comprehensions, pretty in a doll sense, without imagination or artistic taste, some one who would do her share in the hill climbing, who would keep house to the degree of dusting even the tops of the window ledges where no one possibly could look for dust without the aid of a stepladder, but guiltless of exuberance of youth and love of romance.

"I knew you always loved Thurley," Lorraine answered fearlessly. "You knew I always loved you. If Thurley would not marry you and you asked me in her stead, I felt that you would better be married. You might have done some ugly, cheap things, Dan, if you had not been engaged to me. I love you enough to make myself — content, by keeping your house and having your name. I know I'm not Thurley," she smiled wistfully, "but I'll always be Lorraine. Some day you may come to care a little more."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Oh, 'Raine, you care as much as that?"

"I can't say it as I'd like," was her answer.

Dan had gone over to take her gently in his arms. "I'm not good enough for you," he mumbled, laying his head on her shoulder for a long, silent moment.

Nothing more was said, no mention made of the wild-rose siren who shadowed their happiness. Each understood life was to go on in even fashion. Lorraine would gain her joy and satisfaction from being Dan's wife, with the pleasure of possessions; she was born to be a housewife and would have been depressed and useless in any other channel. Dan was born to dominate, to be successful in whatsoever he undertook, tyrannical, aggressive, honest and without fear. Dan would find his peace of mind in his business, more and more engrossed in it each month, in the town's development. Each impersonally would be able to endure the strain of personal unhappiness.

To be able to entertain all the social clubs in the big, sunny parlors with over-stuffed tapestry furniture, the baby grand player, three parlor lamps, a large engraving of "Daniel in the Lion's Den," to say nothing of the American oriental rugs and the mahogany grandfather's clock that played the Canterbury quarters — that was a genuine satisfaction to Lorraine Birge. True, she would have been more happy as the loved wife of Dan Birge, even had they lived as did his rumored ancestor — a trapper's roving, wild life. But that not being the case, Lorraine had the convenient ability to transfer her happiness into things, into becoming a hospitable young matron who followed conventional ways with amusing docility.

To have chicken salad made of real chicken and not a hint of veal, coffee with endless whipped cream and loaf

THE GRAY ANGELS

sugar, fresh peach ice cream and angel food for the refreshment of her Bible class was a positive joy to Lorraine; to be able to help Mary How, the girl who had been "unfortunate," was a greater joy; to see that the struggling little church had a new carpet and a leather upholstered chair for the minister, to give a set of new anthems to the choir — such things as these dulled the doubts in her heart.

"She must be happy and he must be glad he married her," was the consensus of opinion. "She spends as much as a queen and Sunday she had on the fourth new dress since she came home a bride, to say nothing of hats."

"Dan Birge give her pa an overcoat with real Astrakhan collar and cuffs on it and you never see him now without he's got a cigar stuck in his mouth — do you think it looks well for a minister? Some say they don't like it. Lorraine's got a la va-leer necklace and a bracelet watch and a diamond ring besides her engagement ring and she hires a woman to wash and clean. . . . She better go slow or the money will build her right up. I remember how she washed every mite of clothes she and her pa had."

"What about their electric cleaner, that's pretty high-toned? And she had finger bowls, yes, finger bowls when the out-of-town men took dinner there. Ali Baba says they're going to buy a seven-passenger car — of course it's nobody's business and they certainly do a lot of good but they better be careful or they will find themselves so up in G that there would be no living with them . . . my Milly says Dan Birge is going to make his clerks wear black dresses with white collars — now did you ever! I guess Lia Fine and Mercedes Rains won't. Lia just got herself a red alpaca made with white braid —

THE GRAY ANGELS

now what does Dan want to go and do such things for?"

"I dunno, anybody that wanted to marry Thurley Precore is likely to try 'most anything," the subject here changing to Thurley and her rumored fame, the great event concerning Abby Clergy's recovery and adoption of Thurley.

So Dan and Lorraine developed a pleasant politeness in their personal relationships as if they had been married a great many years and, perforce, discovered that to be polite was the easiest way to proceed!

Nor would it be quite fair to say that, in time, Dan did not become used to his well ordered home and excellent meals, cooked to please himself first and others afterwards, the even-tempered, pretty wife who always smiled when he smiled and who would absent herself whenever she suspected that he wanted to be alone, to rummage in the den in masculine disorder, using a cushion for his feet as well as his head or to go into the pantry in trail of half a pie and ruthlessly crumb the parlor rugs while he ate it, listening to his favorite rag-time roll on the player piano. Dan was unconscious of the heinous offense committed, because no complaint was ever made. So surely as Lorraine knew that Thurley ruled in her husband's heart, so surely did Dan rule in Lorraine's heart, and she had schooled herself in ways of becoming essential to his comfort if not to his affections.

Dan's clothes were mended, never a rip nor tear nor missing button was in evidence. If he was late for dinner, "It keeps warm so nicely in that jewel of an oven," or if he 'phoned at the last moment that he would not be home, the telephone operator, June Myers, was forced to report that Lorraine said as sweetly as if she was

THE GRAY ANGELS

being asked to a party, "Oh, surely, Dan, I understand — well, have a good time, won't you?"

"Little mother-drudge" was Ali Baba's name for her when he and Betsey would argue with Hopeful as to the situation. Hopeful, true to her name, tried to convince herself and every one else that joy reigned in the new house with the iron deer guarding the grass plot, that things were better as they were. But Ali Baba and Betsey gave battle that Thurley was the girl Dan loved and Lorraine was merely making the best of it.

They "went out" as befitted young married people and entertained in turn. But Dan paid no heed to Lorraine's friends. Perhaps he was conscious of their thoughts. He managed to stay away whenever Lorraine had in "a bunch" and when they attended dancing parties or automobile picnics, he always left the women and drifted with the men to smoke or talk business even when the men would have chosen to play a little.

Dan was determined to keep up the deceit to himself as much as to Lorraine. He gave her all she asked for — but he never thought of a surprise, a reward, a consolation posy when rain prevented a drive or a bruised finger was the result of trying to hammer a nail in straight. None of the tender trifles fell to her lot. And the old, fiery Dan, who was "bound to be hung," as the village had prophesied, went his way in his own fashion, brooking neither interference nor questioning.

When the new and high-priced talking machine was sent up to the house the day before Christmas, Lorraine had hesitated before she read the titles of the records. She fully expected to see "Sung by Thurley Precore" on the greater share of them. But Dan had chosen with stoic consideration and Thurley's voice was never re-

THE GRAY ANGELS

created to fill their rooms with glorious but unwelcome sound.

Nor did any one mention Thurley to Dan. A few of the old-timers would say when occasion offered, "You got a pretty fine little wife," and Dan would nod cheerfully and answer,

"Bet I have!" And here the matter ended.

Once, Lorraine's father, who had wisely chosen to live apart from his son-in-law's splendor, called on Lorraine during Dan's absence out of town and said in his slow way,

"Well, my girl, have you anything to tell me?"

Lorraine was engaged in making "over-drapes" for the spare room which was to be in pink. She was the sort who could smother a heartache in making over-drapes and planning color schemes as reflected in candle-shades, braided rugs and embroidered bed-shams.

"Tell you what, father?" she did not look at him.

"Is he happy?" the old man added, which surprised her for she thought he would have asked if she was happy.

"I hope so," she told him, laying aside the over-drapes.

"You're a good girl, Lorraine, and you are doing your part. If God sees fit, some day you will be happy, too."

They said no more about the matter. After he left and Lorraine, like all wives whose husbands are out of town, was eating her cold lunch off the kitchen table, she neglected her meal to wonder about the prophecy. It seemed to her, rank little atheist, that it was not God who was to see fit half as much as a girl named Thurley Precore!

When Dan returned — he had been in New York —

THE GRAY ANGELS

she wondered if he had heard Thurley sing and had sent her flowers or tried to see her. As she thanked him for her present, a violet silk sunshade, she wondered if it was a sop to conscience. A cruel regiment of doubts threatened to defeat her loyal resolutions. But she made no comment nor did Dan. They talked of the summer garden, the proposed automobile trip with some other young people, the addition to Dan's store and the splendid way in which his business was going.

"Don't, for cat's sake, take that Spooner girl with us!" Dan said testily, as they returned to the vacation subject, "She hangs around here all the time. What in the world do you see in her anyway?"

"Nothing, but I'm sorry for her, she's so unhappy."

"What's she unhappy about? A great, big, strapping girl who ought to be at work! She makes fudge while her mother irons her dresses, every one says so."

"Oh, Dan!" pleaded Lorraine.

"Ever since she's moved here from Pike she has camped on our doorstep. She makes me nervous with that whining voice and that giggle." Here Dan gave excellent imitations of each. "She rouges like a burlesque actress and dresses her hair in curls."

"Oh, poor Cora Spooner was terribly in love with an actor. He was in a stock company at Pike and he did encourage her —"

"Tell that to the marines," Dan said testily, going to the talking machine and putting on a lively band record. "I can't help that. I notice it didn't affect her appetite. Why don't she get a job?"

"Well, there's nothing in her line here," Lorraine's forehead wrinkled anxiously. She was afraid Dan would forbid Cora's coming to the house, which command would

THE GRAY ANGELS

be absolute. Cora Spooner brought a certain zest into Lorraine's existence. She was a rather handsome girl of twenty-three or four with no intention of working for her living if it could be otherwise arranged. Her mother, whose small pension and capital enabled her to "get along," was Cora's chief bugbear. Cora was a bundle of discontent and weird notions, trying to play the bird in the gilded cage rôle and complain that Birge's Corners was nothing but a prison. She soon discovered that Lorraine's car was good to ride about in, her food the best to be had; it was jolly to stay in the pink spare room with the over-drapes and crystal candlesticks instead of her own forlorn cottage. Besides, her mother did not understand her; fancy wanting any one to be a stenographer or school teacher when heaven only knew that Cora was born for romance, adventure! She had a good notion to cut her hair short and masquerade about the country as a boy,—men always had such good times. Cora had had a half dozen beaux who always dropped her after a certain length of time, saying she was "soft" and lazy and her mother ought to make her work, and turning their attentions to plain-faced girls who could cook and who had a little money in the bank!

Cora dressed in the extreme of fashion, badgering Dan for advance style sheets and asking him to order things for her for which she could not pay, wearing them about with a selfconscious mannikin air. When orange silk stockings and white kid boots were the vogue, Cora stepped forth in the most blazing of orange stockings and the snowiest of white kid boots, her skirts just reaching below the knee. When the matter was mentioned to her mother, she said with a weak smirk that Cora was her pa all over again. Every one said if she could have the training she would make a great actress.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Birge's Corners, having had one genius develop in its humble and unappreciative midst, frowned upon this suggestion — it is not always the most pleasing nor convenient event to have a genius arise from one's backyard!

"I guess Cora will marry well," Mrs. Spooner used to say, "so I don't mind doing the work and keeping her hands white — have you ever noticed them? Dear me, I should think Mrs. Birge would keep a maid instead of slaving so. Cora says she works like a little Turk. They say he has a lot of money. . . . I wish there were some brothers in his family."

So Cora went her selfish way, awaiting the arrival of a rich bachelor who was to besiege her with attentions. She used to prey on Lorraine's sympathy and lack of experience by her tales of being misunderstood and abused. Cora was shrewd in shallow fashion, highly emotional, jealous, small-minded and given to extreme views of anything which happened to appeal to her for the moment. She was a bad asset to the village since she could arouse discontent and rebellion quickly among her associates. She had a way of unsettling every one and then withdrawing from the situation without leaving a solution.

The neighbors said she raged and fought with her mother over the question of money and that she always came out victor. In public, she was devotion itself, although she was ashamed of her mother's appearance and managed to keep her in the house most of the time. "Mamma has heart trouble" was her tender explanation, although mamma was probably ironing ruffled petticoats or cleaning white kid boots at the very moment Cora pensively explained the maternal maladies!

Lorraine regarded Cora as a story-book sort of person, marvelling at her daring and style. Cora openly had tried to bewitch Dan and, being curtly shown she

THE GRAY ANGELS

was of no more consequence than Mr. Toots, began systematically and painstakingly to "knock" him to every one except his wife.

"Poor little Lorraine — little slave, she is — I go to see her because I'm so sorry for her, yes, he's terribly mean — oh, *awful!* I've heard some things, but of course it wouldn't be right to repeat them," and so on, all the time borrowing Lorraine's pin money and eating up her dinners, riding in her car and making Lorraine introduce her to every man, married or unmarried, who stopped over in the village long enough to visit the Birges.

Lorraine did not press the matter of taking Cora on the vacation, although Cora had managed to invite herself!

"There is melancholia in our family," she told Lorraine. "Oh, yes, several suicides — terrible, isn't it? I try not to brood but I am a daughter of the sun, I crave love and life. How could I be content in this pokey place? Oh, Lorraine, I look upon you as a sister — do be good to me," at which Lorraine's gullible little self would be utterly won over and she would bake Cora's favorite cake and make her a crêpe de chine waist and ask over, braving Dan's wrath, some drummer who might be in search of a wife as well as a buyer for his dustless mops!

But there was another person who had come into The Corners since Thurley had left it and whom Dan regarded as every one's enemy. He had said publicly that it was a patriotic duty to have this person, Owen Pringle, although he spelled it Oweyne and had a book plate, shot at sunrise, velvet smoking-jacket, hair parted in the middle and all!

As the record ended, Dan flung himself on the sofa,

THE GRAY ANGELS

remarking, "I wish Cora and Owen would get married — ye gods, do you get it?" He chuckled. "I'd hand them a chest of small silver if they did. How about it — can't you get Owen interested?"

"Oh, Cora wouldn't consider him," Lorraine said seriously.

Dan chuckled more than ever. "If you had a sense of humor, you'd have a lot of fun, but you take these people at face value. Now Owen clerked for me a month and disorganized the whole shop. I'll tell you right now that unless he cuts out his nonsense and goes back to the livery stable from which he sprang, I'm going to get him away from here."

"But his shop is artistic," Lorraine murmured.

At which Dan tossed a sofa pillow good-naturedly her way. He proceeded, in his slangy fashion, to tell her that this Owen Pringle who had appeared from nowhere some months before and tried his best to create a real, true leisure class in the village was nothing short of several kinds of a fool; that when a full-grown man with apparently nothing the matter with him tries to make his living by starting a shop and spelling it shoppe, and has a wistaria tea room and an art department where you purchase impossible penwipers made of cherry-colored silk, baby booties and old ladies' knitted throws, smart Christmas cards telling about everything but Christmas, and writing paper that resembled butchers' wrappings, as well as crazy old wooden stuff painted bright red and green and labelled "window ledges" or "door stops" *and*, horror of horrors, a millinery department which this Oweyne conducted himself, making hats resembling Weber and Fields,— it is time to employ violence! But this was not the worst of his offenses. Oh, no — he had tried to organize a country club and persuade hard-

THE GRAY ANGELS

working, honest men to play golf instead of raising potatoes and instituted the polo craze, thereby demoralizing all the decent, well-broken delivery horses in the township. He lived at Dan's old suite at the Hotel Button and gave chafing-dish parties and thought up smart sayings ahead of time. He wanted to organize a stock company and play "Lady Windermere's Fan," but Cora Spooner and June Meyers were the only two who had out and out joined, so the project was abandoned "for lack of funds and interest."

Owen always wore Palm Beach suits and hats draped with Roman scarfs. He was given to a dash of garlic in his salad dressing, believed the dead returned, read French novels and was undeniably seen sitting in the window of his shoppe sewing maline on hat frames and actually trying them on himself for the effect.

At first he was a novelty, but since tea and nasturtium-leaf sandwiches do not appeal to the male population, only females clustered together in his shoppe and bought his nonsense or defended him.

Owen, too, had speedily discovered the advantage of having Mrs. Daniel Birge as a patroness. Despite Dan's ridicule, she came to the shoppe to buy a hat and thus set the stride for the younger set, while Owen managed to be invited to dinner and to be present on the most interesting of the automobile trips.

"As a member of the idle rich, Owen would have shone," concluded Dan, "but in life his best getaway would be to become president of the Erie Canal." Then seeing Lorraine's real confusion, he said good-naturedly, "If they amuse you, go on, honey, drag the whole lot up here — you have to listen to them," drifting into an unsociable nap and leaving Lorraine occupied with her thoughts.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Dan's other two particular pests and Lorraine's friends were Josie Donaldson and Hazel Mitchell. Josie Donaldson's father was next to Dan the richest man in the village and Josie the natural and fearful result of being the only child of such a plutocrat.

She was a precocious young person with the boast that she could do anything she set out to do, if she could do it her way, backed up by admiring throngs of relatives. She had framed the first dollar bill she ever earned (?) for some minor service in her father's hardware store, had worn the patience of the newspaper editors to a thread by asking for a job as a reporter only to take a few days off, after she was hired, to give a party or write a new poem. Dan called her poems "Josie's dope," as they appeared from time to time in a box border with the heading, "Birge's Corners' Muse."

There were many familiar phrases in these poems which increased in number as time went on, but being Josie Donaldson's, they were passed without question and editor after editor would warn his new and optimistic successor, "When that Donaldson girl comes in here for a job just tie the can on from the start. It is cheap at half the price to be rid of her. You'll know her. She's fat and dresses like a circus rider, carries a bolt of baby ribbon around so as to tie up any poems she may happen to write en route. She'll cry if you correct her spelling and she was never known to get any one's initials right in her life, not even her own family's. Fudge ought to be her life work. She's made love to every fellow in the burg and, when they escape, she wants to start a backbiting contest in the paper. Her pa and ma think Josie is one, two, three, all right, and they have enlarged photographs of her at every stage — from writhing on the fur rug clad in a smile to her graduating dress clasping the valedictory

THE GRAY ANGELS

essay. She writes her father's ads and I'm darned if I can tell whether he wants to run a special sale of sprinkling cans at seventy-nine cents per or whether hell's broken loose in Hoboken! Don't let her get across — not even for a week or you'll have galloping brain fever."

Josie also attached herself to Lorraine, who read her poems and made her fudge galore. She told Lorraine her troubles, that a girl with brains, and particularly a girl with literary ability, was never popular with boys; they wanted silly, little wasp-waisted dolls and she was just too hurt for words — so there.

Lorraine was also sorry for Josie and she let her ravage her sugar barrel and pile on to her best chaise longue to lie and pout and eat candy, trying to find a new word to rhyme with "death."

The other offender was Dan's own stenographer, Hazel Mitchell. Dan, who looked upon the world with a larger vision than did most of the Corners, had a contempt and lack of interest in Lorraine's "grafters." Had he loved Lorraine as he had loved Thurley there would have been many a battle on the subject until he had shown Lorraine the broader vision and comprehension. As it was, he was content to let well enough alone, unless he was called upon to entertain the "grafters" and endure their chatter.

Hazel Mitchell was a slender, wan-eyed girl — "moon face" was Dan's considerate name for her. She was, so he said, eternally recombining her hair when he wanted to give some dictation and always feeling whether or not her waist and skirt were properly interlocked, or running off to visit the male clerk in the men's furnishings or "just slipping" up to Owen Pringle's shoppe to try on a new hat!

Hazel operated her actions on the theory that "pity

THE GRAY ANGELS

is akin to love " and if she could make every one sufficiently sorry for her the day was won. This she managed to do with less consideration for the truth and the common sense of her audience than one might have suspected.

" Oh, I never listen to her yarns," Dan told Lorraine, when Lorraine asked if he did not feel sorry for Hazel who had a brutal, drunken father and whose mother with eight children younger than Hazel never had a kind word for the girl, but expected her to come right straight home from work and start tending the babies. " If there was any one else in this town I could hire, I'd do it without hesitation. But if I let her go, Josie Donaldson would want the place or else Cora Spooner, and Hazel is a mild sort of fool. How can she cry all the time and not get granulated lids? " he ended irritably. " She blots her dictation pad for fair."

" She says they have nothing elevating in their home and she craves better things," repeated little Lorraine.

" Oh, yes, she does — she wants a duke to drop out of the clouds and swoop her up and a lot she cares if her whole family starve to death. I don't blame her father for his morning's morning, if he has to listen to her, and she spends all her money on herself, turning it right into the store for nonsense. Her spare time she spends in Owen Pringle's boudoir," Dan's eyes twinkled, " learning how to be one of the idle rich on eight per! Oh, 'Raine, ask old Ali Baba up for supper — I want to know how it feels to have somebody with sense as a guest."

" But it's a real joy for the girls to come here —"

Here Dan betrayed more insight into Lorraine's life than she fancied he possessed. " It was never a joy for them to come and see you when you lived at the parsonage, scrubbing and cooking and mending! I never saw

THE GRAY ANGELS

Josie Donaldson rolling up her sleeves to give you a lift or Hazel Mitchell hanging about until she was asked inside. It was no joy then. They beat it the other way when they saw you coming —”

He spied a tear in Lorraine's gentle eyes. So he humbly added, “Never mind my growls, do as you like — you don't dictate to me about the grafters I take to lunch or driving, do you?”

Lorraine did not answer; she was thinking that Dan, too, was quite in the same category. Dan had never had any “joy” in seeing Lorraine until Thurley had gone away. Dan was no different in some respects from the others!

Before the vacation occurred, with Owen, Josie and Cora as the guests, Lorraine rummaged in Dan's chiffonier to find extra goggles for Cora and a linen motor coat for Owen. She came upon a magazine lying face downward.

She understood why it was almost hidden, for it was a recent issue of a musical journal and the cover page was a brilliant color reproduction of a photograph of Thurley Precore as *Aïda*, glowing praise briefly written underneath. Thurley wore a mesh of lace studded with brilliants; she half reclined on a divan, like some legendary queen dreaming in the blue-black night!

Lorraine did not know how long she had been crouching on the floor as if she were a child discovering hidden Christmas presents. Dan came in and, bending down, gently took the magazine away. Lorraine started up. She realized the contrast between the photograph and herself far more than Dan — since Dan only realized Thurley. Her bungalow apron over a pink house dress, her heelless slippers, her unpowdered, flushed face — and

THE GRAY ANGELS

that gorgeous, super-person smiling out so temptingly at them both!

" 'Raine, do you mind — just having the picture? " he asked with none of his customary aggression.

" Why, no — of course not." She was glad to make her escape.

That night Dan brought his wife some roses and told her she had on a becoming dress; he was glad Cora Spooner was to be Owen's clerk — after all, it took all kinds of fools to make a world.

And on the same night Thurley, closing her season, received among other offerings a handsome basket of orchids and lilies tied with silvery tulle. The card said, " From an old friend."

CHAPTER XXIV

Thurley's summer was spent unwisely. She excused this by apparently sound reasons. First, she was tired from the season's work and the unusual social demands which it seemed wisest to endure. Secondly, her jealous curiosity was roused at Bliss Hobart's mysterious departure without explanation of where he was going or how long he would remain away, an almost brusque leave-taking which consisted of a brief cup of tea at Thurley's apartment, telling her some critical things about her voice and answering lightly when she questioned him as to his whereabouts,

"I go to my castle in Spain, really, nothing but a simple little hermitage in the Maine woods. I assure you it would be of no interest. Now I must be off, for it is like uprooting an oak every time I go away. I like to leave things as shipshape as possible before I begin to play."

"Are you never lonesome?" she persisted.

"I've all the inhabitants of the forest," he answered. "Good-by. I understand you've accepted for the yacht-ing party, the one Lissa is giving." His face expressed displeasure.

Thurley nodded; she had intended to escape it until this identical moment when his bland, impersonal manner was fuel for her folly.

"You'll get good ideas as to what to avoid. I have always contended that to build a virtuous wall around one's self was questionable,—better be able to view all

THE GRAY ANGELS

that is happening, good and bad, and make one's deductions accordingly. Lissa reminds me of the basilisk serpent who could 'look one to death.' Have a care, Thurley; you've no more youth and energy to spare than most of us." And he left her.

The third reason, and this, too, was an annoying secret, was that Thurley wanted to see the Boston Valley hills and Birge's Corners. She wanted to go home! Yet not as Thurley Precore, prima donna, but just as Thurley, as unknown but as loved as when she had raced through the village with Dan in pursuit or climbed chestnut trees to the discredit of her manners, helping make daisy chains for the primary class to carry into church on Children's Day or working her bit of a garden with wholehearted interest and disregard of her appearance.

The notion was absurd and impossible, and, as a powerful destroyer of whim, Thurley accepted the invitation to Lissa's yachting party and cruised along the coast of Newfoundland in a yacht which had been lent to Lissa by one of her devoted pupils.

The yachting party was not a pleasant affair all told. But it was interesting and exciting. Lissa herself was the discordant note, with the faculty of stirring every one up about something and then losing interest in it and being provoked if the others did not play sheep and do likewise. She had a subtle fashion of reminding every one that, after all, she was the hostess and if they wished they could all get off the yacht at any time they liked and walk home from Newfoundland!

Lissa played with Mark in cat-and-mouse fashion, flirted desperately with Caleb to arouse Ernestine's jealousy, and Caleb, who regarded her as stunning copy, resolved to transplant her bodily in her most daring combination of orange satin with black velvet streamers into

THE GRAY ANGELS

his next best seller. There were ways of gaining revenge, he informed Ernestine, who stayed by herself on the upper deck, dressing in uninteresting smock affairs and talking over prosy matters with Collin Hedley and Polly, while Thurley and Mark romped about to brave Lissa's displeasure as they made pseudo-love in audacious fashion.

After four weeks of this vapid sport, every one had succeeded in getting on every one else's nerves and the party disbanded, its members each vowing that, although so and so was a dear, they would never go away with them again, and Thurley flew on to the mountains to visit Miss Clergy and find an enforced peace in the sanitarium routine.

War broke out in Europe with its astonishing effects and complications and when the fall came to rescue Thurley from feeling as aged as the gentleman from Calcutta who had chronic neuralgia and had occupied the veranda chair next to Miss Clergy's, New York began to hum with winter plans and she returned to Hortense and the apartment with positive delight and eagerness.

Ennui in the young is more deadly than in the middle-aged, since it is an unnatural happening. The press agent who wrote attractive squibs about Miss Precore yachting and in the mountains little dreamed that Thurley started her season with as much zest as the squirrel in the squirrel cage who, from his endless pursuit of nothing, seems to be the proof extraordinary to the world that it is possible for one person to make a quarrel!

Ernestine Christian had romped over to Devonshire to meet a congenial friend who would wheel through the country and thus repay her for the yachting trip, but she was caught in the war clouds and reached home with difficulty.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Caleb met her as was customary, although all she said by way of a welcome was,

"I've had a fright of a time. Europe is seething like a witches' caldron. I'm out of my own cigarettes and special kind of hair nets and my fingers feel like sticks. Dalrymple, the best coach I've ever had, has rushed to Canada to go into training!"

"You look fagged," Caleb admitted as he drove her home. "Well, as nearly as I can make out every one has a grouch on. Thurley is beginning to have bad mannerisms; Bliss must take her in hand. Lissa has ruined her with nonsensical notions and Mark dawdles about only to waste her time. You haven't asked as to myself," he reminded her childishly.

"I brought you a hand-illuminated thing," she answered.

"Oh, certainly — always remember the servants when returning home. It pays! By Jove, that's a nice hullo for a chap, to say nothing of having stood for your glooms in Newfoundland —"

"You were listening behind tall vases to get our conversation," she reproached. "I dare say you've a hundred pages' getaway on a worst-seller."

Caleb was silent and then, instead of impetuous defense, he said in a dreary tone, "Don't believe I'll bother you again, Ernestine. It just 'riles' you and discourages me."

"Oh, do drop in for dominoes; no one else ever lets me win so often," she returned, a bundle of nerves and womanish imaginings, prepared to enter her apartment and find fault and be adorably generous all in one.

Caleb was right concerning Thurley's mannerisms. Her first adverse criticism proved a mental stab at which she recoiled with agonizing and amusing self-excuses.

"Miss Precore has adopted an unpleasant habit of

THE GRAY ANGELS

swaying her body when her voice ascends the scale. Hitherto one of the greatest delights of this young artist was the splendid simplicity which charmed every one who heard and saw her. Not for an instant did she forget the great essentials of musical art — to conceal art itself. She was as unconscious of the audience or the opera company as if she were, in truth, the composer's mental vision when actually writing the title part! It is to be hoped that this habit and the air of self-consciousness may be done away with before either becomes fixed. To lose such an example of artistic triumph as Thurley Precore has demonstrated to us would be irreparable."

No one mentioned the criticism to Thurley — there was no need to do so. Two days after it was printed and her manager told her she must go on a concert tour in February, Thurley dressed herself deliberately in a gown as gleamingly white and glitteringly silver as a path of moonlight; it fairly clothed her in romance. She tied green tulle about her hair and, taking a cloak of emerald green velours, she drove to Bliss Hobart's apartment, having had Hortense first 'phone to ask if he would be at home.

During the drive she planned what she should say with the artifice of a world coquette. Thurley had fallen prey to Lissa's spell, yet she had, being denied the simple ties of acknowledged relationships, found scant solace in the bizarre theories of a small but powerful portion of the world. She had told herself with the recklessness of youth that she was different from others, therefore she had the right to live in different fashion, to love in different fashion if she chose . . . she would not stay a convent sort of celebrity with every one adoring and applauding and copying her in every way imaginable yet no one becoming happily related to her. She regarded Er-

THE GRAY ANGELS

nestine as a remote, though precious, older sister who had made a bad error in becoming so aloof; she wanted Collin to marry Polly Harris in the good old-fashioned way, since Polly had no more chance of writing successful opera than the fire escape of her attic of turning into a marble stairway. She was undecided as to Caleb's destiny. Lissa was interesting, even with her jealousies and vanities, her greed for all material things — Thurley suddenly realized that Lissa was interesting because she never corrected one, she never proved the wrong of this or the right of that — and who, not excepting rosy youth, does not incline to him who never reproves but merely condones? Mark did not really interest Thurley, since she had ceased trying to deny the truth to herself — that she loved Bliss Hobart in such tense fashion that she thought of him as her inspiration in whatsoever she did! The only solace she had when Hobart busied himself with new pupils, going here and there to decide this or that question, or when society women flocked about to try their best to fascinate, was that he treated the entire world with the same indifference and kindly patronage and, if Thurley still hoped through magical power to waken in him romantic love, she had sense enough to keep her secret well hidden — from herself most of the time — in order that she might do her work and stay within his jurisdiction.

She found Hobart and Caleb Patmore playing chess, a favorite recreation of the former's.

"I'm quite a gamester," Caleb said, with visible relief as she appeared. "Ernestine lapses into childhood via dominoes and Collin actually stops painting to drag me into casino — casino, Thurley! Why do you not stroke my brow or show some symptom of humanity? Polly Harris yearns for cribbage; you know Polly still

THE GRAY ANGELS

hints of that ancestry of hers where she had school marm for aunts and judges for uncles and her cousins all went to military academies. Why this odd devil takes to chess for his pleasure — I understand it not. Help, ho, Thurley, take my place — will you? ”

Thurley hesitated. It was not to her liking nor her intention to have any one present at her visit, but she dallied the question gracefully, submitting a list of songs for the concert tour and pretending grave anxiety as to the recovery of one of the songbirds recently in a motor accident.

As she rose to go, inventing a dinner engagement, Hobart accompanied her into the reception hall, leaving Caleb straddled on the fire-settle wondering — who knows what?

“What did you really want?” Hobart asked, as she paused before the door. “Don’t tell me you’re going to do Red Cross work and wear a uniform —”

“It’s the criticism,” she said simply. “It hurt — you might have warned me when you saw my faults.”

“I warned you not to waste summers,” he reminded. “I said all I could. You are no longer my pupil and I have other things which take my time.”

“What shall I do?” she demanded petulantly. “I will not be a mere shooting-star person as so many would like to see me —”

“Well, well, let us see.” He placed his hands on her shoulders in the benevolent, paternal fashion she so admired. But she spoiled it by trying to flirt with him as she looked up.

He dropped his hands as if he read the meaning of the coquettish gaze. “Suppose you find a hobby, Thurley; put all your airs and mannerisms into it. It often works for the best good — what shall it be? Collecting

THE GRAY ANGELS

butterflies or canes, opening Indian mounds — trying to write a play — discovering the fourth dimension — eh? ”

Tears were in her eyes. And the big ache of her heart was changed into a sob which rose in her throat with a penitent murmur.

“ You are cruel,” she said in a fierce little rage.

“ You funny, lovely, little fool! ” he laughed, but in soul-healing fashion. “ Just be the old Thurley and we’ll love you as we did at first! ” After which he opened the door and went down to her cab, telling her how becoming was the costume she wore as *Elsa* and promising to send her a book of golf anecdotes which he considered excellent. She drove off feeling somewhat as Hortense Quinby had expressed it — a mere onlooker at something she craved but could never attain. She wanted to rout Caleb from the fire-settle and sit there herself until Bliss Hobart should return, to say to him with the assurance with which loved wives are blessed,

“ Darling, how stupid of any one to come in to-night — please bolt the door and finish the story we started. I’ll snuggle down on this cushion and lean against your knee. I like to watch the fire as you read to see the characters slip about the coals. . . . I’m very silly, Bliss, but there’s no need for me to reform, God made you wise enough for us both! ” . . .

CHAPTER XXV

Spring brought again the longing for Birge's Corners. Nothing else appealed to Thurley in the way of a vacation. Europe was barred from the engagement tablet, cruising brought memories of Lissa's yachting party and society flirted in vain with Thurley to gain her appearance at Allied benefits and bazaars. Beyond a compliance to please her manager, she declined.

During the winter Miss Clergy had become more and more insensible to everything save the fact that Thurley Precore was a prima donna and she had achieved her aim. Such matters as vacations were left in Thurley's hands.

Ernestine had decided her work was going stale, so a California school where only a handful of the wise and great assembled took her westward with scarcely time to say good-by, Caleb complained.

Caleb devoted himself to emotional war charities since they sold his books — particularly when he would stand in the Belgian booth decorated with streamers like a true harlequin and, fountain pen in hand, await the onslaught of damsels demanding he would autograph their copies of his novels.

Lissa also gave up her time to following the wake of these functions, since she looked well in lace gowns and the supposed patriotic charity on her part bore rich returns in the way of pupils. Watching Lissa, Thurley became aware of another truth: to be an intriguer in art or any other capacity requires that one be not a fool but

THE GRAY ANGELS

possessed of shrewd talents and determination. It takes much time and foresight to be successful in this bent, but if one follows this doubtful path to achieving distinction one has little time left with which to pursue the ethical path of sincere work which wins its own reward.

Besides being an intriguer, Lissa reflected Mark's fame. She never lost an opportunity with which to have their names associated, to call herself a "romantic old sister to the dear lad," or appear at his recitals to sing some lightweight thing with the high, phenomenal note which alone won applause.

"It seems to me," Collin said to Thurley one June afternoon when they were enduring a recital of Lissa's songs at a lawn fête, "that God started in to give Lissa a wonderful voice. He began with this tiptop note and then, as He realized what she was bound to be in spite of every one concerned, He did not bestow anything else on her, but she must have slipped down to earth pirating that note for surely it was meant to be taken away from her!"

Thurley nodded her gratitude for his expression and Polly, who was sitting on Collin's other side, gave vent to an impudent giggle.

"Thurley, did you know people say that 'Miss Precore is a recluse'?" Polly asked her a moment later. "That she refuses to sing for charity?"

"Of course Miss Precore has not worked all winter, oh, no," Thurley's temper flared up. "Polly and Collin, I tell you both that I am tired even to my professional expression. Look at Lissa — look at Mark — look here," she began, pointing out other salubrities and celebrities who were murmuring or warbling "poor bleeding Europe" in properly guttural tones.

Polly was thoughtful and when Collin roused her to

THE GRAY ANGELS

explain why, she said, "Suppose we go to war, Thurley, what then?"

"We'll do what is needed," Thurley said in as sharp fashion as Hobart could have replied.

Hortense Quinby came searching the audience to deliver a telegram to Thurley, delighted with her opportunity to appear important.

It was a good-by note from Hobart and of no importance, so Thurley thought as she read it:

Dear Thurley —

Leaving for my vacation to-night and sorry not to say good-by, will send up the new operas I told you about —
don't waste this summer, B. H.

She rose and excused herself from the entertainment, which caused half the audience to say that "Thurley Precore liked to create scenes" and the other half "she was a purse-proud young woman with no patriotism."

Polly and Collin stayed the performance out, since two of the women Collin had painted were taking part in the tableaux and had sent him those telling three-cornered notes on mauve linen requesting that he see them as "France Enraged" and "Belgium at Bay."

Polly stayed because Collin stayed. After the next number was well under way, Collin, stroking that mad, blond beard of his, asked,

"What's wrong with Thurley? She's not been herself all winter and she is going off in her voice."

"Who wouldn't — living with a ghost person and working harder than an engineer? Bliss will find her a coach this fall who will treat her mercilessly and make her grind again. It isn't that any singing teacher can teach Thurley things; they merely shut her up in figurative

THE GRAY ANGELS

fashion in a dark closet until she promises to behave and sing the way in which she knows she should."

"She went it rapidly for a time," Collin reflected, languidly applauding the antics of a folk dance done by "lanky hanks of shes"—"do look behind to see if Hortense Quinby is listening. I've an idea she sells her eavesdropping per word to Caleb . . . ever notice how she plays ferret when two or three are gathered together talking in an undertone?"

"She's in pursuit of the professor of ethnology that Mrs. Barnhardt has in tow; he's a widower on the loose," Polly chuckled.

"All power to her — what's on for your summer?"

"Work, I presume." Polly's face lost its gaiety. Drudging through a winter of failure with Bliss Hobart telling her she was naught but wilful in refusing to accept the inevitable and also a position — salt in the wound — of assistant librarian for the opera house — it was sufficient to bring about the change of expression. "What is ahead for you?"

"No work, I refuse all commissions, the Allied generals might beg in vain. I'm going to play; there's a lot of us who are going to visit Bliss at his hermitage."

"What luck! Really invade his sacred portals?"

"Well, we call it play. I'm to go and the Russian who writes and that funny little man with the square head, Tyronne — he does those historical essays no one reads but every one looks at underneath a glass case in a hundred years or so. And Caleb and Bliss had a row about Caleb's not writing as he should and Caleb isn't coming. Poor old Sam is in Lunnon recruiting and he is out, too. But we are going to try to loaf away the summer. I'll put a sign on my gate, Shoo flies, don't bother me, I've gone off to the north countree —"

THE GRAY ANGELS

He was selfishly unconscious of Polly's expression.

"How splendid!" was all she said. "I wish I were a boy. I'd go along as Oolong Formosa, the only valet who did not anger the master by gaining a university diploma just when I had become proficient in whisk brooming!"

Collin laughed. "You're a weird little thought," he said carelessly. "Sometimes I think you'll never grow old. We'll be tottering graybeards and Ernestine and Thurley wrinkled dowagers, but you will still be Polly, brown-faced and boyish! Now, I say, why not give up your big dream for a bit, leave it for the next lifetime and will yourself to be born a long-haired Polish genius with opera scores fairly dripping off your brow — come on, Polly, be my secretary. I need one. Look at the young women who do Caleb's stuff and Ernestine has that depressing, rubber tired young woman with a bumpy forehead and Thurley the Quinby monstrosity. I'm terribly behind. Please, help a chap out. It's proper for you to be my secretary since no one can accuse us of being in love — I'll leave you carte blanche and the key to Parva Sed Apta; you can tidy me up like a good elf, answer notes and even wash my paint brushes." There was something gentle and generous in Collin's joyous eyes as he watched her struggle *not* to accept.

"I'd be slacking from what I've set out to do," she said finally. "This war may rob us of our future composers abroad and it's my time to take their place. I study every night, Collin, no matter how I've been working and I've made plans for the summer."

"Study at Parva Sed Apta!"

She shook her head. "I'd rather not. Maybe I'll have to come to it some time, be an out and out dependent, perhaps —"

THE GRAY ANGELS

Collin put his hand down to cover her small, brownish ones. "Why, Polly, you mustn't go getting morbid. It's that damned fire escape and attic of yours and the hungry wolves howling outside your door every time you've a crumb to spare. Come along into the sunshine — and filled pantry shelves. Play I'm big brother to a little bohemian."

They were standing for the "Star-Spangled Banner," and Polly, glad of the release, sprang to her feet and lustily sang the words. But she persisted in her refusal and Collin, a little displeased, told Caleb before he left town to keep a weather eye on Polly and, if she started absurd things like fainting, to kidnap her and take her to Parva Sed Apta where she could protest in helpless but very comfortable surroundings!

Collin did not in the least understand, despite his ability to read his subjects in banal, neutral fashion and to see the inner meanings. He was blind to Polly's tragedy, one of the most cruel of tragedies in the world — unreturned yet undying love.

In fact Collin was becoming used to his subjects' asking that special skill be used in the painting of the lace wedding veil or accurate copying of the gold braided uniform of an army officer — so that popular marionettes were the result, when all the time it was with difficulty that his joyous eyes did not see far beneath the lace veil or the uniform and paint the obscure truths be they ugly or beautiful!

Calling on Thurley a week after the garden fête to urge her appearance at a Newport carnival, Caleb was amazed to find her apartment shrouded in gray linen and even the mirrors tied with gauze. Hortense, in the pleasant rôle of a stay-behind martyr, received him to

THE GRAY ANGELS

tell the news. Thurley had returned to Birge's Corners — the Fincherie was the name of Miss Clergy's house — to spend the summer!

"All at once she demanded the old environment, a strange homesickness engulfed her," Hortense began analytically, delighted to have Caleb at her mercy. "I cannot say whether or not it is wise — but home she has gone. Although she left plenty to do," she could not refrain from adding, "but, even so, it will be lonesome for me."

At which Caleb fled, threatening punishment to Thurley for having run him into danger. Later, he received a note stating that Thurley was at the Fincherie and she would have a house party in August, to save the time out for that because she was sure he would find plenty of new types.

"I'll be hanged," Caleb ruminated over the situation before he wrote Ernestine the news. "But didn't Thurley leave a boy-sweetheart in Birge's Corners?"

CHAPTER XXVI

The reopening of the Fincherie with magical haste, untold extravagance and new notions set the town gossiping anew.

To see every window wide open and Betsey and Hopeful polishing them while Ali Baba hurried to and fro on all sorts of errands bent, to know that the stable was empty of its coupé and motor cars were installed, while a pert maid with a cap with streamers minced down the streets and smiled superciliously at every one—it was enough to give the Corners palpitation of the heart.

The general verdict was that Thurley had returned “to lord it over every one.” A few more romantically inclined thought she had come back to “win Dan from ‘Raine.’” One or two simple souls believed she might be genuinely anxious to be at home again, at least the only home she had ever known.

Thurley bothered little with public opinion. With false assurance as to her ideas, she proceeded to put them into practice without delay. The devil always favoring a new recruit, it would seem, she met with considerable success.

To still the wondering as to Bliss’s summers, the loneliness for a personal relationship and the fag in her head brought about by a season’s hard work and the war agitation, Thurley played along in Lissa’s own manner.

She treated the Corners with good-natured disdain. There was a trifle of the boaster in her as she wore her new creations and drove her smart cab about, smoked openly and permitted unwrapped cases of champagne to

THE GRAY ANGELS

be sent up from the station. But the boasting was because of two elements, the child's love of mischief and the woman's loneliness and determination to let no one suspect that she had repented of her strange bargain.

She had driven into the town with Miss Clergy beside her, quite content as long as Thurley was satisfied, Thurley in a startling gown of mulberry chiffon and a jet toque and her driver in a trig green uniform to match the body of the limousine.

The word spread like fire, "Thurley Precore is back, grand as a princess, famous as all outdoors — paint on her cheeks — Miss Clergy is human — it *is* so, all they've said about 'em — watch Dan Birge, sore'n a hedgehog, watch 'Raine — there'll be doings if she stays."

There was no attempt at actually refurnishing the Fincherie, but only to let sun stream in and soap and water do its best. A piano was the only added asset save the motor cars, the lady's maid and Thurley's accompanist. Thurley preferred to have the contrast of old style furniture, and Miss Clergy wandered vaguely like a lost child through the rooms, smiling with delight at the memories such and such a table or chair recalled; she even pointed to where she had danced the businesslike little polka at her coming out party.

But when Thurley came face to face with Betsey, Hopeful or Ali Baba, all trace of the sophisticated young woman vanished and she flew into their arms in such natural fashion that they afterwards said in stout defense of her, "Thurley ain't changed a mite — unless people act changed to her!"

Nevertheless there was a change. No one can go away from a village as a runaway beggar girl taking the town mystery and richest person in it at the same time and leave a broken heart to keep green her memory,

THE GRAY ANGELS

without somewhat of a readjustment. Nor can she return three years later both famous and rich and lovelier than ever without further complications.

The homey things which Thurley had anticipated would set her right in magic fashion irritated and disappointed her. She wanted to return the same wild rose she had left, being treated as such. But her grandeur was like a stone wall over which the village took turns at peeking and saying, "Well, well, well, so this is Thurley Precore — well, well, *well!*"

Twelve hours after she had come into the town she was bored to extinction. She missed the excitement of her other life and wondered why she had not stayed on to do the things society had begged of her. Birge's Corners was as removed from the real world as Iceland from the tropics, they did not appreciate or comprehend her! She was still just a "lucky girl" in their eyes; they almost questioned her success. She would have to die and leave funds for a public drinking fountain before the village would acclaim her as their own with joy and alacrity.

The hills seemed small and stunted and the air overdusty and hot. The old drive along the river was stupid, she decided, as she took it and was prepared to be drifted back into enchanted girlhood. Her accompanist, who was with her, agreed when Thurley remarked that one never remembered childhood joys with accuracy. The accompanist was thinking of *her* own home town where the hills were green and gorgeous and the river sparkling — but the accompanist had not been home in some time either!

The summer yawned before Thurley like a dark cavern. She longed for fall and work — glimpses of Hobart with snubs and sarcasm from him if nothing else. She wanted Ernestine; she felt she could become as

THE GRAY ANGELS

cynical as Ernestine with no trouble at all and she would agree with Caleb that "kiss-baby" copy was perfectly proper if people were fools enough to pay for it; she resolved to play cards for money the next winter, as Lissa urged, and really to bully Polly into accepting decent clothes and being some one respectable. She wanted Collin to paint her portrait in a certain cream satin frock, because she wanted to know what Hobart would say of it, and as for Mark — there was a dangerous expression in Thurley's eyes as she thought of what she might or might not do concerning him . . . besides, there were many others who would pay her attention, rich, powerful, foolish creatures who follow such butterflies as religiously as the hounds do the hares. Every one must decide early in the game if he is to run with the hounds or with the hares! Thurley had not yet decided. She knew that as she came home from the disappointing river drive the last resolve to be natural and her wild-rose self vanished — it was the final straw which turned her in the way Lissa's white fingers had pointed.

Vows or no vows, Thurley would live! And if she loved some one who chose to live a hermit's life — And did he live a hermit's life despite this chatter of a Maine hermitage? There was room for reasonable doubt. Thurley would live as she pleased, time enough to take the consequences!

She began cheering the accompanist by promises of a house party and her own drooping spirits by the promise of thoroughly shocking the narrow, well-meaning town.

When they drove into the stableyard and Ali Baba came out as was his custom, Thurley sent the accompanist into the house and wandered back with Ali Baba.

"Seems mighty fine to have you back," he said.

"Good to be back, Ali Baba. Well, have I changed so

THE GRAY ANGELS

much?" she asked, waiting curiously for the old man's opinion.

He shook his head. "If your mother was to have kissed you good-by, I'm gosh hanged whether or not she'd know you now! You're a great lady."

"Nonsense, it's just the clothes. Let's talk about every one else but me. I want to get Hopeful and Betsey fur coats next winter and you'll have to find out the sort they like."

"I guess singin' pays," he ventured.

Thurley had led the way inside the barn and settled herself on a bench. "How is June Myers and Josie Donaldson — see, I haven't forgotten their names — and — Lorraine — and Dan?" she tried to say easily.

Ali Baba glanced at her shrewdly. "Oh, June is the same little whiffet she always was and Josie is tryin' to write a play; she'll come to see you, don't never worry. . . . We got a new kind of fool here — Owen Pringle; he has an art store and when he heard you was comin', he sent to town for photographs of you — I didn't know you could buy 'em right out — and he wants you to autograph 'em and then he'll sell 'em — don't you write a stroke of the pen — and his clerk, Cora Spooner — oh, we got a right good stock of pests on hand. I tell you, Thurley, things ain't like they used to be."

"You didn't say about — Dan," Thurley urged, wondering why she trembled.

"Fine — business growing. Was you scared the first time you come out on the stage?"

"Not much. How are all the home folks, that's what I want to know."

Ali Baba lit his pipe in democratic fashion. "All up to snuff, fools included . . . goin' to sing in meetin'?"

"If I'm asked."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Well, for land's sake and Mrs. Davis," he commanded, "sing somethin' with a regular tune. I can't go these songs that slide all over and back again afore a feller gets his foot to tappin' on time. . . . Guess you learned to sing in Eyetalian from what you write Betsey?"

"Yes."

He snorted disapproval. To his mind, as to the majority of village minds, there was no more object in discarding one's coherent language to speak another than to shave off one's hair and adopt a wig.

"How is Lorraine?" Thurley studied the barn floor.

"Too good to be true." Ali Baba stood up and started to examine an old strap. "Her pa is prouder of her every minnit . . . she's made Dan a fine wife — had me up for supper and treated me as fine as silk. . . . Dan's a great lad." He became engrossed in opening the buckle.

Thurley slipped away. Later, Ali Baba told Betsey,

"Operry singers or no operry singers, women is all alike. If they give a fellow the mitten, they just can't help comin' back to see how he's wearin' it!"

Dan was in South Wales the day Thurley arrived. When he returned to the Corners a week later, the town was chattering with new gusto, but he learned the news from Lorraine herself,—from Lorraine, who had been trying to gain courage enough to call on Thurley and blot out memories of that hidden magazine and the unproved yet strong impression that Dan had not confined himself to magazine pictures of Thurley. Just wherein lay his infidelity she did not know; she shrank as do women of her makeup from ever discovering!

Dan came in buoyantly to waltz her around as was his

THE GRAY ANGELS

custom, telling of his success with this man and that and plans for the branch store.

"What's wrong?" he asked, realizing that she was not dimpling with happiness and nodding approbation at every sentence he spoke.

Lorraine disengaged herself from his arm and stood back, twisting her apron nervously. "The town has something new to talk about, Dan. Who do you think is back for the summer?" laughing nervously.

"I don't know. Who ever comes back here?"

"Miss Clergy — and Thurley." It was a relief now her name was spoken. "They've reopened the Fincherie, and Thurley has a maid and chauffeur and about eight trunks — so Ali Baba says."

Dan whistled softly. "What do you think of that?" was his sole comment.

"I suppose I ought to call on her," Lorraine continued bravely, "although she may not care to know any one of us now. She's so famous and changed! Ali Baba says she smokes and paints her face and the lady's maid is prettier than any one in the village. She had her piano shipped from New York and an accompanist besides! Do you think I ought to call?" Lorraine's little face was wrinkled anxiously.

"If you like — I don't suppose Thurley *does* care," Dan went over to the lounge and, flinging himself down, picked up a newspaper, "or she would never have left here! Anything else new — nobody lynched Owen yet — Cora got a new beau? I saw a travelling man in Hamilton that was her speed. When he comes here we'll ask him over and let Cora do her best. I suppose Hazel and Josie have camped out here while I've been away. You look pale, 'Raine — what's wrong — your

THE GRAY ANGELS

dad sick? Then come here and guess what I brought for you —”

“You’re always bringing me things,” she said wistfully. Even his reassuring words did not satisfy. They were spoken with a glib uneasiness which did not deceive.

“You extravagant Dan,” Lorraine said, examining the silver purse, “how lovely of you!”

“I’m going to take forty winks before supper — mind? I can’t get used to irregular hours and country hotels. Oh, ‘Raine, small towns are the devil’s own makings, of all the narrow, carping —” Dan dozed off, apparently, with unfinished sentiments giving way to regular breathing.

Lorraine tiptoed away. “He didn’t seem to mind,” she consoled herself as she cooked supper, “but he has not seen her!”

Lorraine had. She watched Thurley as she drove by, standing half hidden behind bushes to note every lovely, strange detail of her appearance, wondering why Thurley, who had brought the world to her feet so easily, must return to this village to steal the peace of mind of a woman who had not even brought the one man she loved to her own timid feet!

Dan stayed at home that evening as if wishing to prove his devotion to Lorraine. Usually he would have wandered down to the hotel or the lodge room. They talked of everything else but Thurley’s return, although each thought of nothing else, and in the morning Dan said carelessly,

“Don’t call on Thurley unless you like. I dare say she does not expect it. Every gawk of a country girl will crowd in on her, curious and self-seeking, and if Thurley wants to see any one, she’ll come to them. She doesn’t belong to the town any more but to the world.” His

THE GRAY ANGELS

voice softened as he added, "Good-by, dear; now don't work your head off. I'll lunch at the hotel — there is so much stuff to catch up on."

That same afternoon Dan's car drove slowly past the Fincherie, whose crisp curtains and lifted shades told the world a new, optimistic story. No one was visible, not even the much discussed lady's maid or the accompanist who was said to sit on the lawn and drink endless cups of tea "right in the middle of the afternoon!"

Further along in the road he was hailed by a dreaded trio — Josie, Hazel and Cora!

"Oh, Dan, do take us by her house," they began, waving their arms in wild invitation. "We're crazy to see her — Cora never knew her," Josie Donaldson explained by way of excuse as they climbed pell mell into the machine.

"I guess she won't want to remember us," Josie added, "but ma sent over my winter coat one time and she wore it two seasons — she ought to know *me*."

"My aunt helped her a lot too," added Hazel Mitchell, "and she borrowed every one's books. I don't think she'll dare put on airs. I'm going to start right in and call her Thurley just as if I didn't know she was famous. I'm dying to get inside that house. Just think, girls, it hasn't been opened for years until —" Thin ice was fast approaching in the matter of the past and with a swift side glance at Dan, who steered ahead with a fiendish hope of dashing his human cargo off the nearest cliff, Hazel winked at the others and began anew,

"How's Lorraine?"

"Fine! Where do you girls want to go?"

"To call on Thurley. Please, Dan, drive us up there. It'll look so much better if we came in a machine."

"Your machine, anyhow," giggled Josie.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Aren't you working to-day?" he asked Hazel savagely.

"I had a headache and the doctor said I needed fresh air."

"Then you better stay outdoors instead of calling on people, if it's fresh air you are after," he advised.

Nothing but giggles answered him and they hailed the white clad figure of Owen Pringle, who held up his cane in threatening fashion.

"You sha'n't have the prettiest girls all to yourself, you old married man," he threatened. "Do let me sit in the back —"

Unwillingly, Dan halted the car and a new element of disturbance was added.

"We want to call on Thurley Precore," they told Owen, who was always at his best when his arms were full of girl and some one else was driving the car. "Come along and we'll ask her to let you design some hats — come on."

"Joyful, joyful, joyful," he began in an assumed falsetto, at which Dan drew the car to a standstill and looked around with a frown.

"I don't wish to call on Thurley," he said sharply, "as you well know. If you insist on my driving you up to her house, I'll do so. My wife will call on her when she sees fit."

Which somewhat subdued the quartette, who murmured their gratitude and were hurriedly raced back until the Fincherie was reached. Whispering their thanks, each personally thinking what a dreadful disposition Dan Birge had, they raced up the walk — the leisure class of Birge's Corners, as Dan thought with half a chuckle.

He was wondering what Thurley would say to them, as he turned his machine in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXVII

Dan's car rounded the driveway of the cemetery, one of those desolate country burial grounds on a remote hill with a neglected wooden fence running about it and wild shrubbery crowding in on the graves. He saw a smart cab in front of the tottering gate. He knew it belonged to but one person — Thurley — and he deliberately halted his machine and crossed the road to read the telling monogram T. P. entwined with fantastic plumes, consolation for having no real ancestors or crest. As he did so, Dan was glad — glad with all his heart!

He climbed the path which was nearest Philena's grave. He knew Thurley would be beside it.

. . . She was sitting with her back towards him, lost in her thoughts and unconscious of any one's being close at hand.

Dan paused. He was trembling — as Lorraine trembled when he had so grudgingly asked her hand in marriage. He knew Thurley had never loved him in the deepest sense — and yet — he seemed to see her as the old wild-rose girl in gingham, waiting for her lover's coming!

He put his hand to his head as if it pained. Then he came a step in advance. It was hard work to believe this was Thurley. She wore a wonderful silk driving coat which covered an afternoon frock of val lace tied with pink ribbons and a petticoat of pink satin. Her hat, a large, white lace affair, lay beside her, its silver ties half hidden in the grass. Her brown hair was smooth and glossy, betraying endless brushing and care. One hand

THE GRAY ANGELS

halfway supported her splendid, tall self — it was very white these days and the nails shone, while a ring of diamonds sparkled up in triumph. Her pink satin slipper toes and the flesh-colored stockings peeked out coquettishly. With a flash of humor Dan spied the tiny anklet watch on its braided, glittering chain. Thurley was very close to the crimson rambler plant which she and Dan planted for Philena on a Memorial Day, long before Thurley had said her reluctant yes!

Here he stepped on a twig whose crackling noise caused Thurley to turn half way and glance up with neither fear nor surprise — nor special delight.

"Why, it's Dan Birge," was all she said, raising her hand cordially.

"Do you mind?" His voice sounded weak and far away. "May I sit down? I — I was passing and I saw your cab; I was sure it was yours from the monogram —"

"If you like. How nice to see you again!" She spoke in such deliberate fashion that Dan wondered whether she was pretending. She seemed years older. It was not the rouge nor the sophisticated look in the blue eyes — nothing one could describe, unless one wished to be abstruse and say her soul had aged.

Dan broke the pause by saying lightly, "Odd we should meet here, isn't it? I was out of town when you came — Lorraine told me about it last night. She asked if she should call — I didn't know whether or not you'd like to have her."

"It would be most kind," Thurley said in the same even voice. "I have been deluged with calls — mostly out of curiosity. Or to see if I would deny having worn some one else's clothes and having lived in a box car . . . the old car was used for kindling for a poor family, Ali Baba says."

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I didn't know about it until it was too late to save it. It hurt when I thought of your old wagon being chopped up."

"Did it? Sentimental goose," she managed to laugh at him.

"Were you having a serious 'think'?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"About Philena —" She plucked some long blades of grass and began plaiting them into a ring. "How well you look! Lorraine takes good care of you, doesn't she? Does she look as splendidly?"

"Wish she did — you'll see her, no doubt."

"If I stay here. I threatened to move this morning. Some old neighbors came in during my practice hour — they don't understand!"

"What made you come back," he asked with a flash of the old boy spirit, "when you never even wrote me!"

"Do you think it was yourself?"

"No. I'm quite removed from you in every way. Why, that dress and ring cost more than Lorraine spends in a year! As Ali Baba says, 'you are a great lady' — for you wouldn't have come back unless you were," he added honestly. "It makes us feel shabby and underdone by contrast. . . . Of course I never hope to be the same to you — you have everything the world can give you for pleasure and attention. I'm not deluding myself. I'm not such a jay as most of the boys —"

"You never were," she supplemented quickly.

"I always tried to be 'citified,' to wake the town up and keep abreast of the times. Anyway, I loved the finest girl the village ever knew." There was a quiver in his voice. It was like reopening a newly healed wound and letting it bleed a trifle.

"And you married her," Thurley insisted, the coquette

THE GRAY ANGELS

coming to the surface. She tilted her head to look down at him through half closed, purplish eyes.

"I *loved* her — and I have a splendid wife," Dan corrected.

"What a lot happens in three years!" Thurley finished the grass ring and stuck it on her engagement finger. "Shall I make one for you?"

"Do! Ought I to be here taking up your time? Perhaps you wanted to get away from every one or you wouldn't have come." Dan felt the contrast between them more and more; his clothes seemed poorly fitted and his scarf pin a trifle gaudy, his shoes the fire-sale variety — a country bumpkin beside this adorable, tall girl in the lace and pink satin with distracting, tangly ribbons.

"I like to talk to you, Dan. I wondered how we would meet!"

"What made you come back?" he demanded. "It wasn't the Corners and I don't flatter myself it was me . . . for you could have written me at any time and I would have come!"

The slim fingers stopped plaiting the grass. "Would you — *really?*"

He looked at her with despairing eyes. "Did you get any big baskets of orchids and lilies with a card, 'from an old friend'?"

"Were they from you?" she said sadly. "Oh, Dan, it was too bad you ever had to care for me!"

"Can you stop the birds from singing or the sun from shining — or a fool for loving some one very fine?"

"Why, no," Thurley looked out at the hills. "That's always the hardest thing in the world — not the caring for some one but caring for some one who doesn't care for you!"

Dan reached over to take her hand. "Is it that

THE GRAY ANGELS

that brought you here?" he asked tenderly. "Doesn't some one love you? You needn't answer. I know . . . so fame isn't enough," he dropped her hand almost roughly. "Everything's in the devil of a mess," he remarked to no one in particular.

Thurley caught the drift of his remark. "It's the devil of a mess," she repeated clearly, "because we are not bad enough to be all bad and do terrible things that blot out the hurts or not all good so we can be saints with wings and harps for consolation . . . we just struggle — most of us."

"When did you know I was married?"

"The night of my début — like a story, isn't it?"

"And we were there — Raine and I — on our wedding trip." After three years' attempt at bravado, the real heart of him was allowed to suffer, suffer as it should have done three years ago instead of fanning revengeful temper on as a worthless substitute.

Thurley faced him directly, hugging her long legs under her boy fashion. "I'm not worth it. The best part of me is my voice, Dan. Only the worst part of me isn't content to have it that way. I've worked mighty hard since we said good-by — I've known all sorts and conditions of people, great and near great, good and bad — I've had all sorts of men make love to me and I've encouraged all sorts of men — just so far. I've done things no one would approve of my doing and some things that only a few could approve of or understand. Mostly though I've worked and worked and I've decided that it is either work for me all my days if I'm to keep on singing, or else I'll stop working and love and be loved, perhaps. But the two do not go hand in hand . . . perhaps I'm bitter."

"She made you promise never to marry," Dan in-

THE GRAY ANGELS

terraptured; "she is a selfish old woman who wasn't fair!"

Thurley nodded. "Love made her insane," she defended.

After a moment Dan said, "Sing for me, Thurley, like you used to — when things were different."

Reaching out her hand, Thurley held his in simple palship as she sang in a hushed voice the old tunes they both had loved. As she finished, he said with an effort,

"Maybe we better not see each other this summer."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm only a small town man with a mighty fine wife and you are a genius coming here to amuse yourself, to make yourself forget some one who doesn't love you — and that's not a wise combination! I'm liable to lose my head . . . I kept it pretty well after you left."

"Do you blame me?" She seemed contrite herself. "Were you fair?"

"I suppose not. It was just the choice of two futures — you chose the one intended for you. Only now that you've chosen, don't keep on bruising yourself and every one else by trying to — trying to —"

"Don't you want to see me?" She was determined to have some one want to see her own self, whether or not she sang a single note.

"Don't I want to? I'll always want to." He came closer to her. "Were you never sorry you went away? It would help a lot to know."

Closing her eyes and remembering as little of the three years as was possible, nothing of her vow or Lorraine, Thurley gave vent to her starved womanhood. "A little," she whispered.

"Then I will see you and be your pal," was his answer. "Let me be just that. No one can say there's

THE GRAY ANGELS

any harm in it — not even 'Raine. I'll have her call on you, Thurley; that will make it right." He was very close now, his cheek almost touched her own. She drew away.

"In opera those tenors make love as if you were their own," he said savagely. "I hated to see it!"

"But you were on your wedding journey," she reminded.

They both laughed, jangling, noncontagious sounds.

"But, Dan, we'd never have gotten along," she reminded him. "I'm a creature of whims and moods — spoiled, of course, it was inevitable." She began telling some of her experiences.

"But you won't forbid my being just pal," he urged, as she consulted the anklet watch and found it tea-time.

"Not if you're content to have it that way," she promised. "Run along and I'll follow, it would never do to have us drive off in unison."

As she stood up her rumpled lace draperies made her seem more like a little girl.

"Thurley, Thurley," he said in sort of impassioned reverie, "you have come back to me —"

"Only for the summer," she answered in gay decision. "Oh, Dan, remember I haven't really found myself, nor shall I, perhaps. So think of me as lightly as you can. My present state of mind would permit of but one motto for over my fireplace,

'Forty miles from wood,
Forty miles from water,
Forty miles from hell —
God bless our home!'

Lorraine knew Dan had visited with Thurley, so did the village. She wisely kept her counsel and consented to

THE GRAY ANGELS

Dan's stammering request that she call on Thurley — "after all, it might look queer if she did not."

So she went, as much of a martyr as she had been when she brought Thurley the blue set for an engagement present. This time she passed into the parlors of the old-fashioned house aglow with their pretty trifles and cut flowers, the grand piano in the center like a precocious and not to be ignored child, and met Thurley in timid, dignified manner, taking count of her Parisian costume, her new mannerisms and accent, her rather flippant opinions of the topics of the day, promising her thumping little heart that when she was alone, in the peace of her own house, she would struggle to regain her poise and contentment of mind which this astonishingly charming yet affected person fairly wrested from her!

In fact Birge's Corners called on Thurley prepared to ask curious and mortifying questions, only to make a hurried exit in quite a different frame of mind. For with a perfectly cordial manner Thurley met all alike. She had a faculty of making them feel their own selves quite impossible; they were ill at ease before her — nor did they ask her to sing, she forestalled that before the subject of the weather was exhausted. They left saying that "Thurley had a way with her — and Dan could thank his lucky star he had been saved from the marriage." Thurley repaid no calls — not even to Lorraine, although the latter had asked her from a sense of duty. She lived in her own way at the Fincherie with Miss Clergy nodding approval on whatsoever she did or demanded. In a short time, when she flooded the town with what the village dubbed as lunatics, no one was over-keen to have her call.

The "lunatics" were men with bangs, wearing broad scarlet sashes and going without hats in the sun, sketching

THE GRAY ANGELS

under white umbrellas and talking "some queer language"; the women had bobbed their hair and possessed more gowns than brains; they slept away half the morning and danced away half the night while Thurley was the gayest of all the strange company, turning the Fincherie lawn into a stage to have tableaux and folk dances, and all her guests, bobbed-haired or banged or what not, scowled at the natives curiously and commented upon them audibly as if they were insensible of understanding.

Dan Birge was seen driving with Thurley, drinking tea on the Fincherie lawn, being a spectator at the entertainments. Lorraine grew more fragile-looking but kept her own counsel and Owen Pringle failed to secure an autograph or an order for a bonnet, while Josie, Cora and Hazel found no encouragement or interest shown in their dramatic, musical or matrimonial futures!

Presently, the Corners said it would be a blessing if Thurley Precore would choose some other place to spend her summers. Whatever made her pa and ma drive into the town in the first place? She would get her "comeupment" for this smartness, to say nothing of a real white slave dance which she gave, at which she was auctioned off to a big fat man with white hair and a tucked, crêpe de chine shirt, who made his living playing on a little penny whistle! The devil did not have all the good times in the world—neither would Thurley Precore. The older generation had felt from the first it was not boding good luck to have so great a spirit develop suddenly via a partly demented recluse. Here was proof enough! For Thurley and her friends neither went to church nor patronized church social affairs. They lived "like they tell of," was the report, "just as like to get up at three o'clock in the morning to go on hollerin' and yellin' like to wake the dead or else sleep like logs until noon . . .

THE GRAY ANGELS

and if Miss Clergy thought she had done a smart thing in makin' so much out of Thurley because Thurley *used* to be able to carry a tune, she had an awful awakening ahead of her! "

"She'll never get her married off to no one," the village further commented, when Thurley in a tight fitting black habit had cantered up and down the streets on a snowy white mare, while a moving picture man from New York patiently lurked along the roadside to catch a few poses. "Dan Birge ought to go down on his knees to thank Lorraine for marryin' him . . . but does he? Oh, no, when he gets down on his knees it's only to tie up Thurley's shoe latches! Never mindin' his business nor his wife's fadin'—nor the sport they make of him right to his face—he's a worse fool than they are! "

When the Corners became aware that Thurley's terrier, Taffy, had several sets of harness and sweaters, they decided it was far more depraved than Dan Birge's buying a dog and having him ride in the front seat of the car. Following on the heels of this discovery, the terrier had a birthday party with a frosted cake and three candles, and the newspaper editor admitted that they had sent in a paragraph describing the event, fully expecting it would be published. Upon being pressed for the details, the editor said the sum total of the description read,

"Taffy Precore was the proud recipient of many handsome gifts, including a set of white rubbers from Madame Lissa Dagmar and an unusually attractive travelling coat from Collin Hedley. Covers were laid for fourteen and special out-of-town guests were Woofie Airedale, whose guardian is Siri Mantenelli, the opera singer, and Ogre, foster child of Ernestine Christian! "

But even this atrocity was matched—Dan Birge had given Taffy an expensive feed tray and was present at

THE GRAY ANGELS

the party. Hazel Mitchell took the day off to circulate the rumor which developed into the report that the tray was not aluminum but Haviland china with a hand-painted monogram in the center! Had Dan been seen kissing Thurley he could not have been more bitterly condemned. Truly, Thurley Precore must get her "comeuppance."

Ali Baba summarized it one late summer's day as he watched Caleb, Polly and Thurley play tennis against Collin, returned from Bliss's hermitage, Mark and Lissa.

"Well, Betsey," he said, leaning on his lawn-mower handle, "these women covered with lady powder and their dresses cut so low as to leave a fust rate advertisin' space and these fellers a-whangin' and a-bangin' at their fiddles or tryin' to paint a pretty little blue lake to look like a green icicle and none of 'em mendin' a sock or drivin' a nail or carin' about anything except who can eat the most or laff the loudest, all of 'em thinkin' 'what's yours is mine and what's mine is my own'—I want to tell you Thurley's got to get rid of the whole bunch, if she's goin' to be worth a pinch of snuff. This way she'll neither be fish nor flesh nor good red herring!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

After a busy but personally unsatisfactory winter, the war clouds for America gathering without pause, Thurley admitted to Ernestine that she now understood the need for nerve specialists, that she agreed fully with him who has said, "a state of emotion without some action as an outlet is immoral," and she proceeded to drink more black coffee and light wine than was good for her, jeopardize her eyes by midnight reading of morbid Russian novels and to carry on half a dozen affairs with Mark as a sort of everlasting threat in Lissa's direction. Yet in her work Thurley had increased in ability and interpretation; her *Juliet*, *Ophelia* and *La Tosca* were each welcomed as superb achievements.

"Because, my child, you are burning up your personal habits and tastes and nice Jersey cow nerves," Ernestine said with delicious melancholy. "I knew it was inevitable — you could never stay the rosy-cheeked schoolgirl. You'll keep on using up your personal endowments. Fame is a cruel stepmother to personal happiness and you'll be like the rest of us — quite impossible except when you are before the public."

At which decree Thurley fled to engage in a rousing afternoon of ice skating with Mark, only to have Lissa dart down on them with her purring, dangerous smile and rescue Mark. She then sent him on an errand and drove Thurley home in order to bestow a few feminine scratches.

"I'm quite shocked, dearie," Lissa began as they

THE GRAY ANGELS

bowled through the park, "to think you'd take up with the country bumpkin — really, with your career and looks and the way you've been keeping your hand in with Mark —" a bit of a pause here — "it seems to me you ought to play for bigger stakes than that funny store-keeper from Birge's Corners . . . aha, you are blushing! I'm glad you admit guilt. All well enough when you lived in that queer place and he was the richest man in it. It is always well enough when one knows the richest man, no matter how queer the place! But now, Thurley, with the desirables you could —"

"Dan is an old friend — nothing more," Thurley defended.

"Then keep your sentiment in check until you go back to that queer place, for you've let him come to town to see you — twice that I know about." Lissa's eyes danced with delight.

"He comes to buy things for his store." Thurley was strangely alarmed at the secret being discovered.

"Does it mean he must see you? I suppose, poor lad, he spends half his profits on you. What sort of a bonnet will his wife have for spring? Oh, Thurley, if only Bliss and Ernestine hadn't tried to make you a nun and an opera singer at once — wrong — all wrong as can be."

Thurley felt it was her turn to scratch. "Anyway, Lissa, Dan is harmless; he's only a shopkeeper and I'm not stopping his career."

"You allude to Mark?" this with dangerous sweetness.

"Of course, you make him a mediocre dancer when he's the ability to be something fine and big — I don't know what, but I'm saying it is wrong for him to merely dance and if you'd prod him the other way, I'm sure he'd go. Besides, there's no way out for you two, is there?"

THE GRAY ANGELS

I can't imagine your marrying any one and it isn't fair to Mark — he'll be dry rot before he knows it."

"I married a mild person a long time ago; he let me gain my freedom in my own way — it is more satisfactory to be Madame Dagmar than plain Miss. I advise a marriage for the sole reason that the world always takes more interest in you; they are determined to find out what made the marriage go awry. When critics begin to harpoon, Thurley, get married, be divorced and you'll find a sympathetic welcome from the public." She lifted her gold chain with its dangling pencils, rouge boxes, tiny brandy flasks and other trifles, swinging it back and forth with a clinking sound.

"But Mark — is so young —"

"And I am so old? What an amiable little girl it is! I can stay young as long as youth loves me." She seemed a wicked person hiding under a girl's mask. "Don't worry about Mark — unless you happen to be in love with him."

When Thurley came home that afternoon, she found a basket of flowers from Dan and a note saying he would be in New York before June. Trips to New York were not ordinary, easily managed affairs for Dan. He must plan to be away without being suspected. Then he would come to town and stay at a hotel, restless, eager and thoroughly ashamed if he would but admit it, until Thurley permitted him to see her, drove with him, entertained him at her apartment, treating him in a half patronizing, half genuine manner — not quite clear herself either as to her motives or emotions. It was as impossible to think of an actual intrigue with Dan Birge as to associate schoolboys in the lower forms with being regular brigands. True, they play at it — it is often their pet pastime — but there is a prompt ending of it when the

THE GRAY ANGELS

supper bell rings, wooden swords and false faces are willingly left in the woodshed and plain Tommies and Jacks cluster around the table!

So it was with Dan. Thurley, talking to him of this or that, of anything save the things she would have liked to talk of, now scolding him, threatening to send him home, playing now that she was annoyed, now that she was sentimental, now pensive or even angry,—Thurley was doing a simple and a natural thing, proof of what Ernestine had prophesied. Thurley was using Dan as her whipping boy, outlet for her repressed and lonely self. Dan was the ooze, some one human to whom she could vent her whims and moods; some one wholesome and clean-minded with whom she was entirely at ease. She selfishly refused to think of the apparent indiscretion, the lack of honor which she incurred when she let him come from the Corners to stay in New York a week while she showed him her restless woman's self, and let his own man's heart learn to want her in new, dangerous fashion.

Yet Dan was "playing" too. After all, Lorraine was his wife and he had grown fond of her — used to her would be more truthful and less romantic. She was "mighty good to have about." It was a relief to return from New York with memories of Thurley as the great opera singer, aloof, coquettish, temperamental, useless save for her own work, and find the sunny little home with Lorraine who never questioned his absence nor shirked in her tasks. And if the tapestry furniture, Queen Anne walnut and mahogany pedestals with plaster statues got on Dan's nerves when he recalled Thurley's strangely beautiful apartment, and Lorraine's dowdy frocks made him visualize Thurley in some wonderful swirl of satin and lace — Dan realized that a man may

THE GRAY ANGELS

be happily married and yet partly in love with some one else at the same time. After this realization, he re-ordered his life to fit the situation and his generosity to Lorraine, like his manner, was dangerously kind and thoughtful. The town, which would never exhaust Thurley's return as a topic for debate, said, fooling its narrow little self, "I guess Dan is sorry for how he acted!"

Sometimes Thurley wondered if Bliss Hobart knew of Dan's visits. Once she was determined to make him speak to her about something save her voice and decided to tell him, but he forestalled her by saying that the "songbirds" were giving him an album as a present and although he did not care which picture most of them selected for his gift, he had an idea he wanted Thurley as her own self and not in any costume rôle — did she mind?

They were in his office when he made the request, Bliss sitting at his desk, as he had been sitting the first time she had seen him, his fingers touching the little mascot she had shyly presented that initial and wretched Christmas.

"Of course not," — knowing she blushed unbecomingly. "What sort of a 'myself' picture will your majesty have?"

"Oh, just Thurley — when you blush do you know you leave the rouge boundaries far behind? Please don't do your hair like oyster shells — Lissa is the only person sufficiently vulgar to do so — and wear a close fitting white turban besides!"

Emboldened by his request Thurley ventured further, "What makes you order me about so? Am I always to be a novice in your eyes?"

"I like to remember you as you were that first Christmas. I do think, Thurley, Christmas is the only time I

THE GRAY ANGELS

ever allow myself to be sentimental. Remember how you looked in your blue serge, bright red coat with silver buttons and an ermine tam tumbling off your head — a splendid, real thing you were.”

“ I’ve a picture taken then,” she said softly.

“ Say it is mine and I’ll tell you a secret — the greatest sculptor in the world is to be my guest very shortly. He is here from his native land, Alsace-Lorraine, to gather funds. He will speak to us because I’m going to give him a party and at the same time Collin will have the surprise of his life! ”

“ Not going to be married? ”

“ You women! Worse luck. I say — his picture, ‘ Cupid and the Peacock,’ has been given the French medal — and the master will announce it to him.”

“ I’ll send the picture up to-morrow,” Thurley promised.

Hobart’s eyes were twinkling and tender all in one. “ Well, well, I’m more important than the great sculptor or Collin’s success! Thurley, you are becoming dangerous! Some day we shall have a great reckoning, you and I,” and before she could tell him of Dan he had hustled her out of the room, teasing her until she wished she had refused him a photograph of her own self.

When Thurley sat at Hobart’s supper-table to listen to the old master speak of Collin’s brilliant but heartless picture, as he aptly described it, and then a little of his treasure trove of art knowledge, as she saw his stooped and wasted body wrapped humorously in a gay shawl despite social custom, his face dark and dotted with bumps and wrinkles as a New England field is with granite boulders, wild white hair like white flames leaping from his skull . . . she missed the beauty and the wisdom of his words. Instead, her young and attractive

THE GRAY ANGELS

self recoiled from the physical appearance of this genius — the price the master paid in order to concentrate, shut out the things of romance, everyday diversion. As she looked at the faces so intent on the great man's words — words like a benediction, it seemed, for he knew his days were numbered — it seemed to Thurley she saw naught but distorted, repressed or self-indulged expressions and she must rise and leave the room, go into the world a young, untalented girl doing some senseless, regular thing and let those who should love her for her own self speak out and prove their worth; that this drowsy hum about fame and genius was nothing but a sedative the unloved adopt to still the ache. She did not want to sing better than any one else, better than Jenny Lind, so the world told her, she wanted to sing poorly — and have one man say, "I love you —"

Her hands clenched together under the cobwebby tablecloth, as she realized that she had pledged to remain aloof from such possibilities and, by so doing, she had met the man whom she would always love . . . she wondered if she had betrayed her lack of interest in the master. He was saying slowly,

"The two great influences helping me to attain my mark were, first, my mother was my friend; then, when middle age waned and inspiration seemed to have taken flight, I heard Bliss Hobart sing, and so I went on." He was droning now over some technical thing but Thurley kept hearing the words, "I heard Bliss Hobart sing," and with redoubled determination she promised herself to rouse the man in him to speak to her, to give her fresh inspiration, new courage — to go on alone.

"Everything is symbol," the master was concluding, "and there must be unity about all artists no matter how disconnected and illogical they may appear on the surface.

THE GRAY ANGELS

The artist must not trust anything but his eyes, for they shall see the inner truth of whatever he is choosing to depict. Ugliness to the vulgar becomes beauty to the artist, for he sees the inner meaning of it and knows that by portraying it faithfully he can destroy it. Take the picture, statue, word description or acted part of the drunkard, prostitute, the fool, the pervert — do they not cause the sane yet inartistic person to turn away in horror, resolved a thousand times more strongly to live right?"

. . . Here Thurley's mind wandered back to the old man's confession, "I heard Bliss Hobart sing," and she was lost in reverie until she caught again the master's earnest voice as he advised all young artists to see statuary by lamplight in order to find the ivory shades of light and dark shadows that daytime never reveals, not to put more color in the sunrise than did Dame Nature nor carmine on young lips nor fat greens in the summer foliage.

"For then," he said, smiling wisely, "you cease to be artists, but become dreamy and conceited liars! Be sincere; no matter what you may believe, be sincere." After which he sat down as confused as a schoolboy, protesting against the applause, admitting in an undertone to Ernestine Christian that "America was too wonderful, her food too sophisticated, her women too daring." Then Lissa tried to attack him from the other side with some silly question which caused the old man to lapse into his Alsatian jargon,

"Tè, Matame, je ne sais pas —"

Thurley left the party early; Caleb told her afterwards that Bliss was disappointed for he wanted the master to hear her sing. She took a delight in having cheated him of the request. She went to her bedroom to rummage among her belongings until she found an overposed stage

THE GRAY ANGELS

picture of herself as *Violette* in "Traviata" and she inscribed it to Bliss Hobart, sealing it in an envelope and marking it, "For the album — could not find the other."

She said her dutiful good night to Miss Clergy, looking with magnanimous pity at the frail ghost lady who patted her white, ringed hand and said as she had done so many hundreds of times,

"How lovely you are, Thurley — and how proud I am! You have never given me any anxiety — not for a moment. . . . What a girl you are and what a joy it has been!"

To-night, Thurley lingered a moment longer than usual. "Do you think I shall never love?" she asked nervously.

Miss Clergy sat up in bed, clutching her cashmere shawl in excitement. "Love a man?" she asked breathlessly. "Oh, my child, it would only bring harm!"

Thurley soothed her as if she were a child. "I won't break my promise — not even after I repay you — and I'll never repay you if I keep on buying pretties, will I? What an extravagant goose I'm getting to be, vying with every one else for the brightest trifles!" She was talking more to herself.

Miss Clergy misunderstood her meaning. "Never repay me, Thurley! What do I want with money? All I have will be yours, now do you understand? All I have!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Go to sleep, there's a dear," Thurley said swiftly, "and when you watch my flirtations, remember they are only to make the stage loves the more real." Turning off the light she left the ghost lady to her haunted memories.

Half the night Thurley searched among her possessions, finding and destroying notes from admirers, Dan's boyish, imploring letters, her own childish diary she had

THE GRAY ANGELS

kept the first year in New York, Bliss Hobart's few mementoes — the crayon sketches Collin had made of her abroad, Ernestine's letters. She reread her press clipping book, her expense accounts, personal memoranda; she added and deducted figures as if she were a scientific accountant. Then she walked into her clothes room and looked at all the lovely, rainbow things of becoming richness; she opened her jewel case and stared at the glittering bits of beauty within. It was as though she were taking a complete inventory of one Thurley Precore, prima donna.

She undressed herself slowly, never taking her eyes from her image in the glass, plaiting the brown hair into two braids, each as thick as her own arm. Then she rose and quoted quickly the master's telling command,

"Be sincere — no matter what you may believe," adding, "so that's decided — no matter what comes," startled at the insolent assurance of her eyes. If one could have seen her face as she slept one would have noticed foremost of all that a permanent sneer seemed painted on the scarlet lips.

CHAPTER XXIX

Whatever Lorraine thought concerning Dan's frequent absences and his attitude regarding his home and what happened therein, she still followed the path of the Victorian era and kept her own counsel. Nor did any one try to disturb her gentle self by the agony of doubts. For one reason the "genteel grafters," such as Cora, Hazel, Josie and Owen of the art shoppe fame, came to Lorraine's home only for what advantages could be obtained. Why then disturb her who gave them the advantages? There might be an end of them if they did. To be sure they gossiped among themselves and the societies and lodges with vivid imagination and a generous manner of embellishing a truly innocent but unique situation — a high-minded, spirited man too high for his town yet too undisciplined for the city who haunted the footsteps of a high-minded, spirited woman who had become big enough in abilities for the entire world and who was dying inwardly of ennui and heart-lonesomeness, who took this mild sort of affair as the one genuine and refreshing thing in her hurried, *de luxe* existence. Neither of these young people realized the harm it incurred. They cheated themselves into believing it "merely palship" or "an expression of individuality" — a very nice sort of garden and not wild oats affair!

Sometimes Thurley met Dan with a zest for his boyish mannerisms, his telling of the rise in wool goods, what a splendid housewife Lorraine was — only she didn't understand things — how jealous he was of the basso who

THE GRAY ANGELS

made love to Thurley on the opera stage. Sometimes she looked at him in disdain, the strange sneer on her lips as she thought of what a dull existence was Dan's, what a lark it was to see him strive to make as good a showing as the young millionaire who was hopelessly infatuated with this Thurley Precore, boasting at his club that she would wear his necklace or his flowers before the season ended. The vampire which is in all women and which is not a sinister quality only to be raved about as "a rag and a bone and a hank of hair," had for the time being become supreme in Thurley. Dan did not understand this — any more than he understood why he was unhappy when he was near Thurley and always thinking about Lorraine and why, when he returned home, fortified a thousand times by the blessed memories of Thurley's beauty and the stolen moments he had claimed, he was unhappier still.

Dan would return to his immaculate, prosaic living-room where Lorraine would greet him and inform him all in the same breath that Lydia Hoyt was engaged and Lorraine would give a kitchen shower — and did Dan notice how the veranda posts sagged, hadn't he better have a man come up and see about them? — oh, yes, there was something wrong with her car, well — she had let Owen drive it because he had deliveries to make 'way out in the country — beefsteak was three cents higher a pound than last week and two of the church deacons had resigned because they couldn't have their way about the music.

After which Dan would slip away to unpack his bag and Lorraine to prepare his supper. There would be an abundant, well cooked meal on the prosaic table with its nightmares of hand painted peppers and salts and cut glass monstrosities, the water pitcher heavily banded with

THE GRAY ANGELS

gilt. After eating his fill, Dan would depart to smoke in peace and wonder what Lorraine would think of Thurley's new frocks and the baskets of flowers which forever adorned her rooms, of the bizarre friends and their weird ways — he would end, however, with the somewhat hopeless consolation that Lorraine had about as much imagination or capacity for artistic enjoyment as the old lady who, upon seeing mountains for the first time, merely said querulously,

“ Dear me, if any one ever started to roll — ”

For Lorraine would have probably remarked, after viewing Thurley's apartment, “ How in the world does she ever get the work done ! ” letting the panorama of joys and possibilities sweep on uncomprehended.

Therefore, Dan had decided, after very arduous sophistry, it was not wrong to see Thurley, to keep her in his bewildered heart as a sort of lovely idol, something set apart from the Corners and his house-and-garden life — something as different as the scarlet tanager or the jewelled dragon-fly is different from the barn-swallow or the field-daisy ! Each has its own place.

But when spring began to hint of its appearance and Dan had been in New York over Easter, while the Corners gossiped about his absence, although Lorraine bravely occupied the front church pew and wore her new silk gown, Dan came home prepared to tell Lorraine that he would probably be away very often during the summer.

He waited until the work was “ done up ” and Lorraine brought her everlasting handiwork to join him in the den. The den itself was sufficient to make Dan's nerves rebel — it had been furnished a few months after their marriage, an upstairs bedroom transformed into an inquisition chamber, as he told Thurley.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Dens in such hamlets as the Corners offer no *raison d'être* save when a cartoonist gets a peek at them or the family scapegoat turns up unawares and is made to occupy the combination divan and folding lounge.

Lorraine fondly pictured the den as an ideal place for Dan to come and rest—"A real man's room," she explained, "where they smoke and play cards—and talk about things!" It was adorned by Indian heads, an oak table with a prim scarf done in poppies and maidenhair fern, a lounge with pillows made from cigar ribbons and college pennants, all placed in undying positions of rectitude, glass candlesticks with pink shades, a shining little ash tray and match box, a shelf of detective stories and old magazines, an easy chair in old rose velours, two fragile rocking chairs, some grinning lithographs of cowboys, African savages, Christy girls and bulldogs placed at exact intervals about the pink flowered walls and dimity curtains criss-crossed and crisp from recent washing to shut out the light!

Seated here, this April evening, a hundred thoughts clamoring for consideration before the task of telling Lorraine he was to be in New York a great deal, Dan pretended to play solitaire and keep up a desultory conversation about the way a neighbor trained a pumpkin vine over his woodshed and captured the village improvement prize!

The absence of sympathy between them seemed a relentless, chilly wind whipping on his treasonous speech, all the more so because Dan had no truly logical excuse. On the face of it, what more could a man demand? That is, if one were magnanimous about the Indian heads and sofa pillows, what right had he, a small town shopkeeper, to wail his heart out for a genius?

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Oh, 'Raine," he said abruptly, shuffling the cards with a fillip, "I may have to run off for a few days in a couple of weeks — all right?"

Lorraine did not answer; she bent her head over her work.

Dan looked at her sharply. "Isn't it all right?" His voice had that dangerous gentleness at which she always winced.

"Is she coming back this summer?" She dropped the sewing.

Dan put aside the cards and came beside her. Under the flare of the reading light her face seemed thinner and more childish. There was a miraculous subtlety of features, a hidden delicate something which he could not analyze; he felt boorish, brutal, as absurd as when he was one of Thurley's guests at a party and every one really made polite game of him.

He kept looking at Lorraine, wondering why this change had come about; tired purple shadows were under her eyes, the eyes themselves were soft, shining things seeming to look far beyond him.

She raised her hand, crumpling the sheer, white slip on which she was sewing.

"You mean Thurley," he stammered, "well — I — I don't know, dear, you see the Fincherie is Miss Clergy's house and of course . . . oh, 'Raine . . . now, I understand," his eyes staring at the tiny, gossamer dress!

CHAPTER XXX

With an armful of projects under way, Hobart had little time for Thurley during the winter. He met her with a sort of "You've got beyond me but I don't think I'll bother to chase after" attitude, praising her when she did well or keeping his silence when she did some showy, foolish thing, food for press agents. He was noncommittal as to Dan Birge's visits — as Miss Clergy had been, since the latter looked upon them as a particularly choice part of her revenge, for here was a man debarred from marrying the woman he loved, yet following her hopelessly whenever she permitted, Pied Piper fashion.

When Lissa had hinted of unsavory things to him, Hobart dismissed the matter with a careless speech and a shrug of the shoulders. This he had learned to do long ago, whenever Lissa came prattling of some imaginary scandal which pleased her tarnished mind. There had been the time she tried to convince Hobart that Collin really did not paint his own pictures, but hypnotized Polly into doing it and thus kept her starving in a garret, hopelessly in love with Collin and Collin playing a modern Svengali. Lissa had endeavored for many days to make Ernestine believe that Caleb was the storm center of a liaison with a Broadway actress, thus ferreting out Ernestine's state of mind concerning Caleb and promptly running to Caleb to tell him, ever so confidentially, that Ernestine was in danger of drinking herself to death, poor woman,— too bad she loved that wretched gypsy violinist

THE GRAY ANGELS

who had played with her in concert work — could nothing be done about it? The world had soon learned not to value Lissa's information, paying no heed to her hints of Sam Sparling's dreadful actions or that Bliss Hobart did not go to his hermitage in the Maine woods — why, there was the silliest little movie actress at San Diego — living in a perfect castle, too —

So Hobart, well versed in tactics, when Lissa approached him on the subject of Dan and Thurley, managed to switch the conversation on to the information that Mark had danced so poorly his position as premier was threatened and Lissa had better adopt the diet of a Belgian refugee if she still wished to look her best in tailored things! Lissa, ousted for the time being, would depart to vent her wrath on the shoulders of her maid or Mark, who was, in truth, dancing poorly because he was bored and he felt dancing was not a man's lifework when other things kept whispering themselves to him — and, hang it all, why did a clean cut, wonder girl like Thurley let Lissa pull her around by the nose anyway?

In a spirit of half earnest, half flippant revenge for Hobart's neglect, Thurley sang poorly at a salon concert at which Hobart was the host. She so resorted to Lissa's mannerisms that Caleb took notes on his cuff for future use.

Thurley knew the concert was a failure since she was to be the one to make it a success. She refused to meet Hobart's disappointed gaze, pretending to be engrossed in listening to a Russian agitator telling of his escape over the frontier.

The next morning, when Thurley was debating whether or not it would be convenient to have Dan visit her so soon again, if this summer was to be spent in shocking the natives or, as Caleb had urged, selecting a

THE GRAY ANGELS

site for a permanent country home and seeing it well on its way to completion by fall, she lifted the telephone receiver to answer its ring and heard Bliss Hobart's voice — his teacher voice — saying,

"Come over at ten, Thurley, you've a lot to answer for."

"Suppose I won't come?" she retorted, delighted at the prospect.

But he had disconnected. She deliberately made herself late by overdressing. A mad hatter's model of a bonnet in blue and a frock of rose taffeta with a coat to match furnished her with the proper scenery, she admitted to herself. She slipped in to where Miss Clergy industriously sat knitting army socks and told her she was off for a coaching lesson.

"A coaching or a dancing lesson?" Miss Clergy asked mischievously.

"Both," Thurley declared.

She found Hobart in his inner study; he was playing an old gavotte and greeting her with a curt nod.

"Well — is a luncheon to follow the lesson? You must have thought I'd keep you all morning. I've a pupil at eleven."

Thurley sat on one of the little peasant chairs and pouted becomingly.

"I dress to suit my mood. Some mornings I have a desire for a winding sheet; this morning I wanted rose taffeta and sapphire velvet."

Hobart smiled. "Does Miss Clergy ever row about your adorers?"

Thurley flushed, saying in a more natural voice, "Not exactly. To her mind it is the more enhancing — keeping mankind at bay. And it settles a distressing question for me. . . . I daresay I'd make a cropper of mar-

THE GRAY ANGELS

riage, most of us do. This way, I do as I like," turning to contemplate the empty fireplace. "Must I be coached this morning?" she added. "My throat feels scratchy and I have a benefit concert to-night."

"It wasn't your voice — but yourself." He ended the song and, rising, took an opposite chair before the fireplace. "I am going away earlier than usual this year because of some work in England; making art aid the war. If I don't see you again, let me give you a little moral coaching which is all you need to set you right."

She would have interrupted, but he held up a protesting hand. "Age before camouflage," he pleaded. "For a long time, Thurley, I have been watching you. You have come now to where you feel that an utter disregard of morals is really preparation and a necessary frame of mind in order to win the violet crown —"

"What do you mean by the violet crown?" She did not look at him.

"One of my pet names." He became boyish in manner as he always did when prevailed upon to speak of the things nearest his heart. "I've a lot of pet names — and secrets — tucked under this salt and pepper hair of mine. A long time ago, I sang rather well, — nice people have said I sang as well as yourself, with as much ease and as little training. That was why I understood you. My mother was an Italian and my father an American, but we lived in Italy to please my mother and, after my father died, she felt she could not bear to leave the blessed memories, for they had been ideally happy." He seemed lost in a reverie from which he roused himself with an effort to continue:

"After my mother was gone and I was singing as well as yourself and every one making quite a fuss over me and wanting me to tour America," he seemed to dread

THE GRAY ANGELS

even the saying of the words, "I loved a woman who was older than myself and who sang, too, but not well — more like Lissa. I loved her very dearly and, of course, I believed in her. But she was an art intriguer and not a worker and she said she loved me merely because my golden voice meant real gold — for her to spend. . . . After awhile,— I suppose I became a tedious, dreamy lad too occupied with ideals,— she found a man with a great deal of money and no more knowledge of music or art than a lapdog has. . . . Without telling me, she went up to Paris and they were married and she laughed at my moonings and made fun of my ideals. . . . For a long time I was ill, absurdly so, and when I was well, my voice was gone," he tried to speak lightly, "but in its stead I had a vision. . . . Does that sound too superlative? It does to myself, for it is one of the things words spoil the full meaning of; it would take music to express it, a sonata inspired by the three oldest sounds in the world —"

"What are they?" Thurley asked, feeling the simple girl from Birge's Corners again, a *de luxe* Topsy!

"The wind, the death cry of a warrior and a woman's sobs," he answered so quickly she knew it had been clear to him for a long time. "No one will ever write the sonata, so words must do their best. At least, I choose to whom they shall be said. For it is as if you were looking into the very soul of me, as a mother does when she first sees her newborn child, the instant when the mysterious bond between them is formed for all time, despite all happenings."

Thurley leaned forward in her chair, her blue eyes serious. "I shall understand," she promised.

"I have never told any one all I shall tell you to-day, because I could not bear to have them jangle and disagree in silly, stupid ways — like an auctioneer trying to

THE GRAY ANGELS

prove that the contents of a shrine were not of intrinsic value but merely worth while as souvenirs! Because I think it is worth while, I shall tell you. All the others," he shook his head, "were not worth it! Nor could I have told you at the beginning — you could not have understood. Now, you are at the crossroads, flirting with each direction, undecided which way you are going to travel."

"I shall understand you," she repeated. To herself she added, "Because I love you!"

"It seemed to me as I pulled myself together after the fever and cast about for another way of being useful, that true art was not symbolized by a laurel wreath but by a violet crown — I daresay the notion started from my admiration of the wonderful enamelled cups used in cathedrals — lavender and sapphire. So I named the symbol for genius, the crown typifying supremacy, violet, as the ecclesiastics interpret it — humbleness, for those who possess true genius must be ever mindful of the sparrow's fall. It has seemed to me the violet crown could be, figuratively, won only by such a nation as America, which, like the Child in the temple, commanded respect and consideration of the elders — or the Old World with its shallow reasonings as to art. For the Old World has, to my mind, treated art and its artists somewhat after the fashion of Barmecide's Feast — the Arabian Nights' tale of the prince who bade the beggar sit at the snowy table a-glitter with golden service and, lo, when the platters were lifted, the plates were devoid of food! So it is with true art — we have had wonderful achievements, but we have not yet made ourselves realize the moral significance and responsibility of art and artists, that has been as devoid of justice as the golden plates of Prince Barmecide were of food —" He paused.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley was eager to speak. "Why, then, can I understand your vision?" hoping for but one reply.

"Because you are one of the vanguard! Another of my secrets! There are never many of the vanguard, and we are not always rich or great or talented. Sometimes the vanguard of civilization are humble and their earthly record most uninteresting. But have you never thought to yourself there were just a few, rare souls who — who understand? Who can smile at the trials the world seeks to escape from and sometimes sob at the vapid joys for which the world strives so unceasingly? The vanguard can make the most out of little and belittle the most. They seem to glimpse the coming trials of the nation and her resultant triumphs; they are never given to cowardice of flesh or spirit. As a general's military vanguard moves further along the battleline, so we, the altruistic vanguard, must be ever ahead of the times in thought, deed and prophecy. It is not always a pleasant rôle — to blaze the trail. The vanguard are usually misjudged, ridiculed and never idle —"

"So the first vanguard was the group at Calvary who gave defiance to the mob." Thurley forgot the personal issue between them.

He nodded, well pleased. "In science, theology, economics, art, so on, we always find a few members allying themselves distinctly with each great cause and these few dare to see and to say wherein lie the errors of the past and the possibilities of the future. Let you and me, Thurley, as artists help America as a nation to the winning of the violet crown."

"This war —" she began.

"Ah, not this physical war, for it will be over within a short time — so to speak. America will enter and soon surface peace will result. But long, long afterwards —

THE GRAY ANGELS

when art assumes fairly normal proportions and consideration and the world lapses back into the old ways — what then? Some one has said the French have taken this war as an immortal martyrdom and the British as a bully, well worth while game — then let our nation take it as the chance to win the violet crown — first by the necessary sacrifice and change in extravagant, thoughtless living which will prepare our minds to be ready for the great moral battle long after the fields of Flanders are recreated into fragrant orchards.”

“Then you did not want to preach to me,” Thurley sighed with relief.

“This is all a part of it,” he warned, “for you have strayed far from the vanguard. First, to finish about myself. For I have been glad the world lost an excellent tenor because he might have been a foolish one. I am better placed as I am; but you, Thurley, are running amuck. Why this shallow flippancy? This false basis of theories, mistaking shadow for substance? Because you hear such and such a great *diva* bore a child for a crown prince — that this artist acts under the influence of morphine and that one paints only when addled from absinthe — you must not pursue these phantoms of self-indulgence — and you who sit there looking confused yet combative, you are at this very moment halfway inviting an intrigue with an honest country lad — Dan Birge! Can you not remember that scullery maids as well as prima donnas dabble their virtue in cheap stains; there is nothing distinctive about it?”

Instantly at war with herself, yet happy because Hobart was speaking to her, Thurley, of her personal tangles, she began a spirited defence, using Lissa's blasé theories.

He waved them aside, answering in a brusque manner,

THE GRAY ANGELS

a contrast to his dreamy fashion of a moment ago, "You say, 'I am different — on an independent train!' Then so are we all, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.

"Why applaud, throw gold, even title a man or a woman who, despite remarkable ability, has betrayed every simple tenet of faith and mocked at the very subject matter which gives them their laurel wreath? We need a new standard for art, Thurley.

"As the air has been conquered for a flight, a dozen things of science, a broader version of theology, let us make the standards of personality of importance in considering genius. Ultimately we should not lose. The artists themselves would be the spiritual gainers, if forced to live up to the ideals they so conscientiously and glibly prescribe for every one else. You hear of a tradesman who abuses his family and his business invariably falls off as a result. Yet we encore a man who has cynically betrayed a young girl and laugh indulgently when reading of his drunken escapades. 'But what a Romeo!' we say. 'We must excuse him — an artist, you know.' There is an end of it. Is it not true that in politics nothing damns a candidate more than a whisper against his good name — his name, mark you, not his abilities? In religion, what ruins a clergyman more than the rumor of the little choir girl —? In everything else the world has attempted to deal out justice regarding the equation of personal and professional life, but at the mere mention of talent, genius — temperament — even a bobbed-haired musical comedy actress — the public sinks giggling like a schoolgirl into an orchestra chair and becomes ineffectual, blind, duped — immoral!"

Thurley made no comment, but she rose and showed her nervous tension by walking rapidly up and down the floor.

THE GRAY ANGELS

After a pause Hobart added, "If we are to make American art permanent, we must make American artists hold to the best in themselves. That, Thurley, is my vision! That is what you must do, for you are of the vanguard and you have true genius. Of course there would be a time of temporary disillusionment for art, with every one scrambling about and crying, 'Help-ho — surely, not *me!*' After the readjustment, when the craft of artists realize that the public demands clean-breathed lives of them and the surplus of amateurs have been beaten back into the ranks, I see an art so ennobling and enduring that all other glories pale beside it — an art of which America alone is capable — virile, innocent not ignorant, mystical yet practical. In truth America's sixth race can be the inspiration of the bleeding, older world. That, Thurley, by degrees, must be our part in reconstruction — the winning for America of the violet crown."

Thurley paused in her walking of the floor.

"But when one is so young and — when —" She faltered, all the wild-rose self of her returning, like a child reluctant to confess its misdoings.

Hobart took her hands in his. "The personal twist to any problem is for the person to solve; no one else can estimate it as well. Only to you have I told my vision, confided my hopes. Do not disappoint me," he would have added more but the rap at the door recalled him to the eleven o'clock lesson.

"Au revoir," he said gaily, "and if I do not see you until fall —"

"You must see me; you cannot leave me at the cross-roads."

"You are making yourself walk backwards to them," he contradicted.

THE GRAY ANGELS

“ You did not finish about yourself,” she refused to be conscious of his appointment, “ the woman you — loved — that part of the story —”

“ I told you all I have ever allowed myself to remember,” he corrected, the inner illumination vanishing and the rather cynical man of the world in elegant morning dress remaining.

CHAPTER XXXI

Thurley went directly home instead of keeping a luncheon engagement with Ernestine. She wanted to spend the afternoon in remembering all he had said. The greatness of his vision and the new standard for art had not impressed her as much as the moment when he had taken her hands — or told of his false love. Then Miss Clergy's promise crossed the clearness of her reflection, blurring it badly; Dan's bucolic letter on her desk marred her thoughts as well — so did the flowers from Mark, the handsome gift book from some one else; a myriad of incidents and engagements came to spoil the reverie. As sacred to her as the vision which had been shared with her, Thurley kept telling herself, "I am of the vanguard . . . and I love him . . . no other man can tempt me . . . I love him, therefore I can live up to his vision and help him . . . for he is sadly limited. He merely expresses what some one else must do. . . . I love him," and when the charming question hinted itself to her,—"Suppose this man of a great vision and grave purpose, burned clean of youthful tragedy, should love *you* — what then?"—Thurley admitted that vows were brittle things and that if the circumstances so fell out she would not hesitate to prove the statement.

The next morning when she was writing Hobart a note trying to express something of all she felt towards his vision and his influence, as Dante said of Virgil, "their

THE GRAY ANGELS

guide, their master and their friend," Lissa dropped in for a call.

"Bliss sails at noon for England," she informed Thurley. "Isn't it wonderful to be all important, war or no war? They want him to patch them all up with patriotic art — I suppose he'll come back an earl in spite of himself —"

Whereat Thurley felt as heartbroken as a girl deserted by her bona fide lover, as she tried to chat pleasantly and not betray her disappointment. She entered again the squirrel cage of doubts and subterfuges until she felt as absurd at having seriously considered being one of the vanguard as one who admits having won a husband through a matrimonial agency.

Lissa's way was quite comfortable — uneasy lies a head which does not wear a becoming hat was the greatest depth of her philosophy!

So Thurley dragged the summer through, wondering why Dan had ceased to write to her, imploring her to return to the Corners or permit him to visit her in New York. In the true sense Thurley was glad Dan had not written, although no woman can ever quite forgive a man whose interest in her ceases. She was piqued, on her mettle to sing her best and disprove Hobart's flowery vision, as she had told herself it was, to sing so well and live so flippantly that she could say to him with truth, when he returned, "Your vision is impractical," and when a certain multi-millionaire, a chewing-gum king he was, to make it the more humorous, made love to Thurley and plied her with attentions, Thurley did not hesitate to flirt with him publicly until Sunday newspapers, despite the war, devoted a page of pictures and lurid writing with repeated exclamations about "the young *diva* whose vow never to marry

THE GRAY ANGELS

has not kept her from being soul mate to the chewing-gum king! ”

The chewing-gum king was boresome after a little; horse-racing, good wine, pretty women without brains, clothes trees upon which to display his wealth, were the extent of his possibilities. And Thurley, without hesitation, proceeded to pass him over to willing rivals who had watched the apparent progress of the affair with scantily concealed envy.

Miss Clergy had not gone to the mountains but stayed with Thurley, who flitted restlessly from one watering spot to another, appearing at the private affairs for war charities, now and then running into Caleb or Ernestine or Collin who, likewise, seemed to be having a table d'hôte vacation, a little of everything and none of it satisfying.

Hortense Quinby, again in charge of Thurley's apartment, and Polly Harris proved the only exciting events in the long holiday. Without warning Hortense left Thurley as suddenly as she had attached herself to the retinue, a desertion which brought Thurley into town to see why this sudden resignation of a now valued member of her staff.

She found Hortense in a khaki uniform with innumerable brass buttons and a mock knapsack across her chest, her restless eyes sparkling with a new eagerness as when she had pleaded to become necessary to some one who was already famous. Hortense was to do land duty in behalf of the French war orphans, only, as she told Thurley forcibly, until America entered the war and overseas duty confronted her. At last she could prove her worth to the world! The land duty in behalf of the orphans, as nearly as Thurley could make out, was to appear publicly as often as possible to solicit subscriptions from all

THE GRAY ANGELS

who passed by,— a more exciting form of the occupations of old men to be seen on side streets, a restaurant sign harnessed on both chest and back, announcing the wonders of pot roast and noodles for fifty cents — pie extra.

“ But just when you’ve learned to be of such use to me,” Thurley urged, “ the way you keep everything going — why, Hortense, weren’t you happy? ”

At which Thurley was treated to the initial outburst of Hortense’s emotional spree.

Briefly, it was this: The chance for the great adventure was presenting itself to women whose lives had had neither adventure nor romance. And if romance and adventure had not been theirs, it was their duty as individual souls to create it, woo it, pursue it, anything to obtain some smart and stinging knowledge of the world at large. It was better to wear out than to rust out, this strange, middle-aged rebel said, her long, thin hands fondling the buttons of her toy uniform.

“ Ah, but I thought it was for the orphans,” suggested Thurley, who had, unostentatiously, paid for the support of half a dozen of them.

Well, it *was* the orphans, true enough — but the orphans were a means to an end — there, that was the situation! Being third rail to fame was not satisfactory, it was like leading a hungry man outside a restaurant window wherein are displayed three-inch steaks flanked by asparagus and keeping him there, close to the food it is true, but separated by a window glass which, if he breaks it, means jail!

Being associated with genius had merely whetted her appetite for expression, nor was she alone, she added, all over America were women realizing that the opportunity for self-expression, freedom of speech and action was

THE GRAY ANGELS

theirs; they would proceed on the quest for adventure, something to be an everlasting antidote against the drab pattern of their ladylike lives! Few suspected this rebel germ was quickening in the flat, thin chests of conscientious, rubber heeled librarians, middle aged, a trifle unwholesome spinsters like Hortense — but it was true. Whether or not it was milk for French orphans, which was a worthy cause playing into the hands of the restless searchers, a cause was being given them and take it they would!

So Hortense, for the time being, passed from Thurley's life with Thurley pondering after she had stamped from the room with a ringing, military tread and given Thurley her headquarters address, adding that she would see trench life or commit suicide!

When Thurley sought out Polly to beseech her to come and look after things, particularly now that Thurley was to begin coaching for her new title rôle in Liszt's "Saint Elizabeth," she found Polly giving a party royal in her attic, celebrating being left a small legacy by a maiden aunt. The aunt had also left Polly a letter expressing her opinion that her niece had been nothing if not a fool to have left a good home with a decent furnace for a tement and a daily diet of macaroni.

As Thurley looked at the hilarious feast, well under way, she laughed in spite of herself and wondered whether or not the aunt's shade was walking restlessly! For Polly in a new frock as brown as Spanish fish nets on the Santander sands, was pouring out claret with a lavish hand and pressing alligator pear salad and jellied chicken on her nearest guest, the table abundantly strewn with every eatable known to luxury.

"Polly's pretending her opera has been a success, I do believe," a more practical guest whispered to Thurley.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"She's determined to burn her money up as fast as she can; she's loaned us all ten dollars —"

Thurley found Polly quite determined to pay no heed to her aunt's letter.

"Why should I remember I come of gentle people?" she asked, her brown eyes sparkling naughtily. "I'd rather have one or two glorious parties, treat myself to all the music I want for a season than to go snailing back to Painted Post and live in a cottage completely surrounded by neighbors. I've run wild too long, Thurley dear — don't look so disappointed. Why, you beautiful, lovely thing, what right have you to show me the error of my ways, you with a king's ransom on your fingers this minute? Yet, Thurley, when I look at you and summon my Scotch second sight to lend me wisdom, you seem fey to me, fated as the Scotch know the world. Shall I tell you your *possibilities*?"

"It's the claret," Thurley insisted. She did not want to talk about herself because she did not seem a struggling, interesting human being like the rest.

"No, it's not claret but second sight. Bliss knows I have second sight; he's often asked me for opinions — for everything but my operas," she added a trifle bitterly. "Now you do seem fey, as if you ought to become a rosy-cheeked matron, the sort that has a big, brick house just packed with young people who all confide in you, and a nice, gentle sort of relatives, linen closets with lavender bags between the snowy piles, jam closets, rooms with old, soft rugs and mellowed furniture, all kinds of books and pictures and nothing so wonderful that art dealers would ever employ burglars to borrow. Just the kind of things that years afterwards would cause your children to say, 'Oh, that was mother's — I shall never give it up,' or 'Here is her shawl. How she laughed at herself for

THE GRAY ANGELS

huddling so eternally in it! Let's keep it in the cedar chest she had as a bride, she'd like to have it so, I'm certain!' You understand, Thurley dear, the lovely common things inspired by some one not common! There, that's quite as smart as Caleb himself could have said it."

Forgetting her errand and Hortense, Thurley repeated, "It's the claret, Polly — and you're quite mad. . . ."

She rushed home to practise scales diligently, remembering with every thump of the keys that she was never to marry — tum-tum-tum, and that Bliss Hobart was a visionary dreamer — tum-tum, art never could be placed on a moral, idealistic basis, never — ti-ti, she had no idea of trying to be one of the vanguard because how useless it would be when one was tied to a ghost lady — tum-tum-ti, that wretched bohemian of a Polly had unsettled her — ti-ti-ti, anyway, Bliss had said he would not consider a vow to a ghost lady as binding — tra-la-la, yet after confiding his great secret, why did he rush off without a good-by, expecting her to do what? Why didn't he go scold Ernestine or Caleb or Collin, some one besides herself — ta-ta-tum, she finished with a final thump and a superbly clear note which brought Miss Clergy to the door to applaud.

For the first time Thurley turned from her in recoil. She seemed a jailer preventing Polly's vision from coming true — and what a lovely vision it had been! . . .

"Thurley, are you ill?" Miss Clergy was asking.

"I'm tired of everything," she answered, without controlling her temper, "of singing and New York and myself — and you," like a walli-walli windstorm she swept out of the room, remaining alone until she could laugh off her outburst by a light, humorous explanation of a tight slipper or the alarming story told by the weekly weight on undeniably uniform scales!

THE GRAY ANGELS

When Hobart did return, he was a tired and not easily enlivened man whose summer had been spent overseas planning things calculated to counteract the effects of "military poison ivy," so he said enigmatically. He met Thurley with seemingly weary interest and a disapproving shake of the head when she tried again to convince him that her way and Lissa's way was the best — as well as the easiest — and the chewing-gum king only one of a handful of "pet robins!"

Then he looked at her in her sophisticated maze of gold cloth and gave a boyish laugh. "If you told me you were totally depraved, I should only laugh," he said. "You are trying to fool yourself into thinking yourself a first water adventuress, so how can you expect to fool me? Come, come, what terrific things have you allowed to happen to your voice! We shall have to send you to the nursery to begin again! So Lissa coached you! I knew the voice assassin's marks of violence."

He busied himself with getting Thurley's voice in shape for her opening night. They did not talk again of the vision or Thurley's snap judgment regarding life. Once Thurley ventured to say he looked tired and he answered that when a man is used to really 'living' for three months of the year, to be shunted into another channel tells on his disposition, but he would weather it all right and he was very glad to have been of service.

"I think one of the hardest things in the world," he added, "is to be the man highest up! To have no one to whom you can go and dump your budget of woes and worries. Sometimes I long for a limited, brainless task, devoid of responsibility, sure of an uninterrupted lunch hour and a sick benefit."

Wondering over his words, Thurley reached her apartment to find a letter from Dan, hesitating before she

THE GRAY ANGELS

opened it to wonder what had made him break the long and unexplained silence. Then she found her answer.

Dan and Lorraine had a son! Dan had written Thurley to tell her he loved his wife as he had never loved any one before — not even Thurley. He had confessed to Lorraine his unloyal, wayward impulses and she had forgiven him. Their joy over Boy was so great that he wanted Thurley to be friends "with the family." He ended almost naïvely, he hoped that she would understand and be happy for them all!

So a new, engulfing envy, seconded by Polly's little prophecy, beset her and during the winter and spring there was but one outcome, Thurley worked as she had never worked before, deaf to pleas about her health, bitter towards her admirers, aloof from Hobart and the others of the family, working without pausing, as if to drown the very whisper of the things nearest her heart.

With the declaration of war came a multitude of surprises and readjustments regarding the family. To Thurley's surprise her own interest was poised, critical as if the war were past history and not in the making. Miss Clergy was "not interested," the Civil War had written itself for all time on her ghost heart. Mark was not going, he declared; Collin took the rôle of a misguided pacifist; Caleb plunged headlong into a war novel, "The Patriotic Burglar," upon which he was to realize a fortune and retrieve some very asinine losses on the stock exchange. "The Patriotic Burglar" was to be called upon to pay his income tax, and how explain the income of a hundred thousand a year, partly obtained by the theft of Clementine Van Schaick's pearl necklace! Now Clementine was a little volunteer worker at the income tax office — enter High Ike, the patriotic burglar, they meet — and here romance fairly skidded under the speed of

THE GRAY ANGELS

Caleb's typewriter. No soldier was to be without a copy, commissioned officers would be expected to carry five at least, and that was as far as the war affected him!

Ernestine took the pessimistic view one would have expected of her. The country was going to the dogs, she declared, really mistaking her own intensive selfishness for the failure of the country.

Hobart, who had already been fighting "art battles" abroad, had little time in which to express opinions and Thurley, having word from Hortense Quinby that she expected to sail for overseas shortly, began to reflect on the social readjustment which would result from the needed advertising of charities, loans, what not, since the only logical advertisers and workers would be the hitherto domestic women who would now step beyond the firesides and lift up their voices.

Thurley came to think more concerning Hobart's vision, the final victory for America in establishing a new morale for permanent art than she did of the need for guns and men, although she generously wrote checks and sang gratis. As for Lissa, she believed in having things to do credit to her patriotism and her complexion simultaneously. A toque of blue poppies, a red tulle veil worn à la odalisque and a besashed and bepleated bit of white scenery for a frock, the American version of Nanette and Rintintin, faithful mascots who saved Paris from the Hun, worn on a silver cord, these completed her opinion of the war and in this outfit, to Thurley's surprise and amusement, she appeared one warm May day to say languidly,

"Being meatless day, I've taken the rat from the cat and am here for a cocktail. There's a dear! Oh, hum, all my pupils are rushing off to be motor corps girls or kitchen drudges or something like that. When I have to

THE GRAY ANGELS

appear enthusiastic and call them all little Joans of Arc, I feel like saying, 'How can I conserve a cup of mush spilled on the kitchen oil cloth?' and let them go forth properly shocked to the last bit of braided uniform! What does Bliss say about the opera? I should think with all those horrid German singers sent packing there would be a big opportunity for us home-grown. Bliss has always been obstinate about my appearing. I'm as sure of success as you are."

Before she left, Thurley understood the part Lissa meant to take in the war — to go overseas apparently to sing for the boys and in reality discover and capture a widower duke for her second husband.

"Why not?" she asked. "I'm sure women have the right to seek their fortune?"

"Not at such a time. They should be sure they are needed before they go across to eat up sugar and beef and wheat — even to take up space. There should be an examining bureau where every one could be proved a hundred per cent needed."

"Ridiculous! Think of the chance to know titled women. I wouldn't wonder if I went to London after the war — a few titled patronesses and one is established! Of course you are bound to meet them over there, when they are all scrubbing floors and cooking. It's so easy to become socially elevated these days! Look at the people right in America who have slaved at the Red Cross rooms to become socially exposed! Oh, I know the majority are self-sacrificing, but the other side is worth a place in history, too."

After she left and Thurley opened the window to banish Lissa's heavy and synthetic perfume, she thought of her cold-blooded determination to find a duke, a disabled duke would do if his title was sound, and marry

THE GRAY ANGELS

him or become friendly with blue-blooded women of England who welcomed all who came to serve!

To condemn a class is not only useless but ethically a grave error. No one has ever given it credence save fanatics or disgruntled, long-haired socialists. But to argue both sides of the question, giving each fair representation and admit the errors and the virtues of both — that is common sense.

So Thurley sat this May afternoon while the city throbbed with its new turmoil, thinking of many things, all of which related to Hobart's prophecy — that America must win the violet crown, definite recognition by the Old World that America had established new standards for art, independent of the frayed and tarnished rules which had, in a sense, caused present bloodshed. As a nation's art progresses, the nation's virility weakens, so history has proved, Thurley reasoned. When art reached a state of so-called perfection, commercial, physical and religious supremacy of the nation dimmed — because the foundation for that art was not made of common sense rules but fantastic and self-indulgent exceptions. Let the foundation for art be moral even if limited to begin with, inspired by self-sacrifice and with sincerity its determining motif and that nation can advance in art without fear of decadence. She went to the window to close it, looking down at the busy, broad street where strange posters met her gaze, women in uniforms, women stopping pedestrians to beg for the cause, women making speeches, boys screaming out something and waving banners, while echoes of a popular military song floated up to her,— all gay anesthesia for the horror of the war. The great and needed romance of war had taken its clutch on America; reality was left unhampered for the battlefield. That was the great division of the

THE GRAY ANGELS

forces. From now on anything tinged with military trimmings would be accepted. Fortunes won by a trifling penwiper made of red, white and blue cheesecloth! An actress however infamous of character and threadbare as to ability would be lauded and her salary tripled when she screeched camp ditties or waved a flag! Pictures with the flag would sell, pictures with soul and peaceful backgrounds would be shoved aside, books such as Caleb's would flood the market, military diaries would come in droves to the editors' payroll. For the time being art would be a necessary factor in arousing emotions and sustaining interest. It always had been so, it always must be so at such a crisis.

It occurred to her that if Hobart's vision could have been realized before this crisis what a mightier, more direct influence true art would have in rousing the commoner. For it would be an art of spiritual sincerity and no one would be forced to discriminate among a myriad of near-art wares and mercenary efforts in patriotic guise. The peasant whose taste for opera and pictures is unsullied until he mingles with the conglomeration which this over-generous nation offers is to be preferred!

And afterwards, Thurley thought,—strangely enough, when peace had come—would the vanguard of art be brave enough to banish forever the surplus wares, false standards and begin anew?—for these swash-buckling profiteers would be loath to cry quits.

CHAPTER XXXII

An hour later Thurley discovered herself in bed, a doctor watching her and Miss Clergy in the doorway, her face gray with apprehension. A nurse whispered she had fainted while standing at the window; that there was no need for alarm. The doctor added that she had brain fag, nothing serious if she would go away to some place where she could be pulled together. After more suave remarks and those little sugar-coated pellets left behind, he departed and Thurley sent the nurse and Miss Clergy away, tossing restlessly and wondering if she could make them understand that she would not go to a milk-fed sanitarium where nurses sneaked about in rubber-heeled shoes and one had to exclaim over sunsets with the other patients, to say nothing of bulletlike little biscuits and health foods and the talk on "Iceland Moss" given by a convalescent missionary!

When a wild rose tries to become a hot-house variety there is certain, some time during the transition, to be a bad scratching of thorns which was all that ailed Thurley.

In the morning Bliss Hobart dropped in to see her and Thurley brightened so visibly that the nurse left the room, grinning superciliously.

"Bother opera things," Bliss said. "I'm really glad you fainted yesterday; you fainted enough for me, too, didn't you? I was just considering getting up on top of Grant's Tomb and dancing a Highland fling — masculine form of nerve fag. . . . I say, Thurley, do you know you're coming with me to my hermitage? I'm leaving

THE GRAY ANGELS

to-night and we're to bully Miss Clergy into being chaperone." Here they both laughed at each other like children and the pellets almost lost the sugar coating in wrath at the small part they played in curing this wild rose person! "Oh, yes, you are coming. I was just leaving for Blessed Memory myself when they told me you were ill. A month there will set you right."

"You mean the place you disappear to —"

"And Lissa hints of a harem, a dope den, a gambling lair and what not? Yes, ma'am, Blessed Memory is its name. You'll be there this time to-morrow. Remember, rouge boxes and high heels not admitted."

He left her to thank her kind fortune she had had sense enough to faint and bruise herself slightly. Why, oh, why, had she never thought of doing so beforehand? She was humming as she waited for her maid to come and get a steamer trunk. . . . Miss Clergy watched from the corner of the doorway unawares. But what she thought she kept to herself.

Blessed Memory, buried in the wildest part of Maine, with the nearest post office entirely unpronounceable, proved to be an advance sample of paradise. Being perfect there was nothing complex about it — and very little to tell concerning it. Time flew, the hours tumbling over themselves like babies at play. It was exactly like the thirsty traveller coming upon the ice-cold mountain spring and drinking his fill with no comment but the satisfied and grateful, "A-a-h, man alive!" So it was with Thurley.

It seemed that Hobart had come into the wilderness prepared to prove that he could make it habitable, as he told her. After he had built a shack, found his food and water, lived by himself for weeks at a time to experiment with bark, twigs and logs — learning the call of wood

THE GRAY ANGELS

beasties and forgetting the cries of men — he permitted himself a few extravagances in the way of tools and furnishings until Blessed Memory, as he called the small, silvery shingled house set in a sand dune like a great moonstone in palest gold, came to be a reputable habitation where he took refuge each year, "living," he said, in order that he might "exist the rest of the time."

Miss Clergy was ill at ease in her nunlike bedroom without ornament and scant of furnishings. But she found thought for reflection in watching Thurley and Bliss as they went off to try for fresh fish. Her queer, bright eyes would blink rapidly as if a succession of unpleasing thoughts had attacked her conscience and she refused to give way to them. When they would return and hallo for her to answer, she would usually take refuge in the plea of eternal neuralgia and leave them to their own ways for the remainder of the day!

The rooms contained old-style braided rugs and a spinning wheel which, to Hobart's delight, Thurley knew how to use, thanks to Betsey Pilrig, old blue china and pewter, a square piano on which Hobart played jingling tunes while Thurley sang them as gloriously as when she played missionary with Philena. The beds were mahogany, so was the fire settle, and there was an out-door Dutch oven which her host insisted on using, a pump and a well and a tiny barn where his wheezy little automobile rested when it was not chasing up and down country roads in search of supplies.

He had no real neighbors nor did he wish for them. He had bought enough acres on all sides of Blessed Memory to secure him freedom from molestation. He wanted to feel, so he explained, that even lavender and black velvety butterflies, great, golden bees and humming-birds might come and go at will.

THE GRAY ANGELS

There were no books or even writing materials in the house. "When I have to go in to town for supplies, I get my extremely urgent mail and reply to it while at the post office," he explained. "But I wish nothing inky about the hermitage."

Thurley, who had first viewed the little house and the wild surroundings with dismay as to what she would ever do with herself, fell to work within a few days and became a busy Martha engrossed with house and outdoor work, plying the axe while Hobart was away, replanting flower beds, picking berries, climbing trees to sit astride some sturdy limb and dream of nothing, actually to forget language, as it were, entering the realm of delicious thought, rejoicing in merely singing *sounds* as did the birds, instead of clumsy words needing to be phrased and accented.

"I never knew any one could be so busy in such a wilderness," she told Hobart one late afternoon when they had tramped clear to the sea-coast and sat resting before they journeyed homeward with the aid of barn lanterns.

"Because you and I and other creatures who live by their wits most of the time and have the tasks of physical existence performed for them, need to remember that one can almost see and feel the truth of eternity . . . the eternal seasons, Thurley, the ever-dying, ever-reviving blossoms, the migration of the birds, the continual progress and continual decay of all forms of life — that is what makes us really seem so busy. Because most of the time we are nibbling at a fragment of this supreme truth, boxed up in a steam-heated apartment with a man and a maid and an engagement tablet to be our aids, we sing some silly opera and return to the apartment convinced we are quite indispensable to mankind. We need to come

THE GRAY ANGELS

to such a place as this and humbly realize eternity. That is why I named the little house Blessed Memory, because I carry the thought with me when I lock the door for the long, white winter."

Thurley was silent, the most sympathetic answer she could have made. She was mentally quoting,

"Cool girdles and crests of the sea gods,

"Bright hollows of billowy foam"—as suitable for the scene.

It was a quiet sea haven they had found. Bliss had tramped there many times, he told her. Around them were wet sea wrack and pungent bog myrtle, tall protruding cliffs with the green grass clinging to them and dusky birds incessantly slipping about. The sea itself was a shadowy, gray wilderness broken with rosy trails which led to darkish mystery. In the sky a star trembled.

"Tell me more," she demanded childishly.

"What about? I must seem as bad as a complete reading course shipped on without warning," he began, playing with pebbles, "but do you know what I was thinking, Thurley? That the art vanguard are certain to succeed, that this time of strife should not be for merely freedom of seas and colony disputes—it is the time of discord in which all matters shall have their hearing. And then, one sees absurd glimpses now and then that make one want to shout for joy—"

"What?"

"Oh, a life insurance agent with a well worn copy of Keats in his inner pocket or the apparently frivolous hairdresser who reads Ruskin's essays with the girl who sells fountain pens during lunch hour—or a very famous prima donna who finally admits that the shadow can never be the substance and that works without faith are dead, too!"

THE GRAY ANGELS

Thurley was thinking in disconnected fashion. "Tell me, will the war level class as well, so that it will result in there being no very rich or no poor?"

He shook his head. "We must always have wealth demonstrate herself with freedom; we must always have class. Let each man be what he was best intended; we cannot have one class, one rule, one creed any more than one dimension. The Cause who made such eternal contrasts as the snowbound north and orchid-decorated tropics, the sagebrush desert and the French vineyards — has the example not been set us for all time? There must be wealth and its opposite poverty and the sunny, useful medium running between the two and understanding each alike. Remember, player and worker are like the wings of a bird, equal and necessary. Class must exist the same as vicarious atonement — the mother bearing the child, soldiers fighting for stay-at-homes. The ancient but sometimes forgotten or denied unity of the race is the belief in immortality."

It was dark; the sea with the white rocks rising out of the water here and there gave the effect of the black and white cathedral front at Siena. Hobart lit their lanterns and urged a homeward journey.

"I don't want to go," Thurley begged. "Tell me more —"

"Yet you try to make me think you do not believe my vision," he said, "that you will not be like the soldier in the old song, who did not halt but 'he gave the bridle-reins another shake.'"

"Tell me why artists have different lives from the world in general," she retorted.

"There are some isolated, superb but lonely souls whose work robs them of human ties and leaves them chaste yet wistful. True, again, on the firm yet terrible

THE GRAY ANGELS

foundation of expiated sins is genius often laid — the splendid blossom of the tree of experience. The greatest leaders have often, to their enemies' delight, pleaded guilty to a youth of folly, small faults, petty actions — and yet there has come an awakening and with the handicap of the past as a ballast, they forge on to the heights. I sometimes think handicaps are as necessary for an artist as ballast for a balloon. Without them we would sail upwards beyond ordinary comprehension and the whole purpose would be of no avail. Let us stay sufficiently earthbound to insure usefulness and proper responsibility. . . . Come, Thurley, even if the poets say the children of dark and the children of light tread the same pathway, our lanterns may fail us and we would have to scramble to find the house." He helped her up.

"You mean, too," she said, not content to stop the argument, "that artists should set the example — as well as prescribe one —"

"Those who are not sufficiently developed to perceive the higher cosmic laws must have man-made laws to teach the first great principle — which is to obey. Obedience either forced or voluntary is the first requisite in moulding character. Those of us who can glimpse the higher laws must also keep annoying man-made ones to help those less developed by our example."

Thurley began picking her way along the beach, singing softly:

If all the seas were one sea — what a great sea it would be!
If all the trees were one tree — what a great tree it would be!
If all the axes were one axe — what a great axe that would be!
AND if all the men were one man — what a great man Bliss would be!

Three weeks later when Hobart drove Thurley into

THE GRAY ANGELS

the nearest station, he asked almost timidly if she felt it had been worth while.

"So worth while," she said, "it showed me what I must not do."

Miss Clergy gave a sigh of relief as she was settled on the local train running down to the main line.

"You look like a little girl again," she told Thurley. "I'm sure it was very kind of him. . . . Did you ever fancy he might fall in love with you? Imagine how distressing it would be for him — knowing your position!"

Thurley resigned herself to the inevitable, and as they jolted onward she thought of how very great and how very small was love and that from atom to apostle the personal equation would come blundering in on one's most sacred thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The remainder of the summer found Thurley undecided as to what she should do next and not having Hortense as an aide-de-camp and with Polly still squandering her legacy, Thurley stayed in town to collect her faculties and study new rôles.

She found that women were chattering about "finding the group spirit," pointing with envy and emulation to the soldiers who had found "the group spirit" and were working together for the cause. The germ of unrest, masquerading under the altruistic title of "group spirit," was prevalent among all the women Thurley knew and those of whom she heard.

Even Ernestine came to explain incoherently that she had cancelled the season's engagements to sail for France—"to help"—anything that was needed, play or amuse or scrub floors, Thurley dear, and was noncommittal as to her disorganized interests at home or her personal qualifications to serve in this capacity. Thurley accepted Ernestine's good-by with a sense of amusement. Thurley herself did not feel she was slacking although it would have been difficult to explain just why she did not. She, too, had brought the "blessed memory" with her from the hermitage, acting as ballast for the chaos which prevailed about her.

A feeling of age had also claimed her. She seemed to see beyond these struggling, enthusiastic but deluded women who were sincere in their efforts, yet forgetful that to serve one's immediate circle of dependents is the

THE GRAY ANGELS

best way in which to serve the larger cause. Thurley saw ahead to the psychological struggle taking place in one year, three, five — who knows? — when these restless spirits, suffering from repression of emotion or ennui had rushed pell mell with a bevy of excuses and accomplishments into the teeth of the fight and the fight had unexpectedly ceased and their adventure was at an end.

She did not try to argue with Ernestine to stay at home and when Mark came to say good-by, a few mornings later, saying he was to dance and give athletic drills overseas, she said very faintly,

"But is war a pink tea? If I were a soldier and I saw an able-bodied man dancing about in a toga to give an imitation of Greek handball, I'd ask him to get into the trenches with me or quit. After all, Mark, you are going because Lissa is going!"

"Lissa is after a duke," Mark said lightly. "How about one of these floor-scrubbing duchesses? What about yourself? You might capture an earl," drawing on his cream-colored kid gloves. "Fancy Bliss, who blew in yesterday fit as a fiddle, declaring he would stick along at the old game right here."

Thurley's face must have showed her joy.

"Oh-ho, so Lissa is right," Mark laughed. "She always contended that it was Bliss whose word was law with you!"

Thurley put up her hands in protest and dismissed him, sending Lissa a good-by present and evading a possible interview. It did not seem as if she could endure these vapid persons who were rushing over to gain fame, excitement, copy or a worth-while matrimonial alliance! She saw, in truth, the result of Bliss Hobart's words, that were the foundation of art of sterner stuff regarding per-

THE GRAY ANGELS

sonalities, these cluttery amateurs and intriguers would be, perforce, engaged in some industry and not foot-loose to follow the procession. The really great souls whose work would ennoble the cause could go forth unquestioned and certain of results.

The morning's mail brought her consolation — a note from Collin, characteristically brief and with a pencil sketch of himself, very knock-kneed and bulging of eye, clad in uniform.

Dear Thurley (he wrote)

After all, women aren't the only ones to change their minds. Don't laff! Or I'll cut you off without a helmet. I've traded my brush for a bayonet. It got me. That's why — selah,

Collin

"Good boy," Thurley said as she finished reading the note to Miss Clergy, "and I suppose Polly will march in with the Long Island Legion of Death behind her, making war on me if I dare to smile."

"But you won't have to stop singing, will you?" was all Miss Clergy answered. "There'll be enough people left at home to listen to you?"

"I won't stop," Thurley promised gently, adding to herself, "my singing is Miss Clergy's form of an ooze!"

She was wondering these days if, when she met Bliss Hobart again, the holiday at Blessed Memory would serve to bring them into closer understanding or if, as after so many other rare moments, there would follow a desultory friendship with the same harsh taskmaster and critic speaking no more of visions.

Later in the day he did call on her, the same elegantly dressed Mr. Public Opinion who was so besieged with patriotic duties and enterprises and enmeshed in a mass of

THE GRAY ANGELS

detail regarding the reconstruction of grand opera, law suits impudently presented by dismissed Teutonic song-birds, the revival of English and French music and the possibility of a new prodigy, that he seemed to Thurley to be twin brother to the man who had played and worked and thought in the fashion of a hundred years ago — in a hundred-years-ago setting.

"Polly is busied with a surprise," he told her, "a horrible war opera, I presume. No one seems able to convince her she is hopeless. And that ridiculous devil of a Collin has gone to fight, bless him, while Ernestine has fallen prey to war-madness which is besetting emotional and idle women and she will return with a new stock of morbidity — because she has tried to do something which she had no excuse for attempting."

"What of Mark, Lissa, Hortense?" she persisted, laughing.

"Banish them from my thoughts —" he looked at her critically. "Yes, it did you good. Now that I've set the example, why not follow it? Find a wilderness and build a house in the middle of it. At eighty-two you'll have the critics wrangling as to whether you are your own daughter!"

"Where shall I go?" she asked rather pointedly.

"Aha, you want to poach on my reserve? You can't do it! Take your own home town; isn't it wild in spots? Seems to me you used to say so. Take twenty acres and bury yourself in it. Do the things we did those four weeks."

"Birge's Corners!" So, he was to remain aloof. Birge's Corners where she had returned in foolish triumph and ostentation — Dan and his son and Lorraine would be there, a harmonious trio! There was no place for her at Birge's Corners.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I'll consider it," was all she said.

"I came to tell you of Sam Sparling," Hobart added in a gentler tone. "Evidently you have not heard?"

She shook her head.

"It happened while we were away. Had a nervous collapse — a stroke as well, and was battered up for keeps — all one side. Seems he had tossed his money around without thought and he was left stony broke. So they gave him a royal London benefit. The war paused long enough to honor the old chap. People came hours before the performance and waited on street curbs, brought their lunch and all that. A stall was as hard to get the day of the performance as a slice of the moon. Baxter says it was as great an event in its particular way as a coronation. They all turned out, great and small, old and young, to give Sam a valedictory. And now blush, Thurley. They even had your voice on a talking machine singing, 'Drink to me only with thine eyes,' and it was encored! There, doesn't that set you up? I can't tell you the exact programme, but every great artist available appeared. There was every one from a coster singer to the finest Shakespearean artist. And then the curtain rose for the finale — all the artists were in tiers and dressed in evening costume. Up high on a sort of throne sat our Sam, weak and not quite resigned yet to the truth of what had happened but gamey old Sam in a tuxedo and a gardenia in his button-hole! The house burst into one sobbing roar — for he was *their* Sam Sparling and they were going to prove it."

"What did he do? Oh, why weren't we there?" Thurley cried.

"First, the house sang the street gamin song Sam had sung when a lad, a catchy tune with a refrain of,

THE GRAY ANGELS

' Let me hold your nag, sir,
Or your little bag, sir,
Anything you please to give —
Oh — thank 'ee, sir — !'

"He used to do a clog dance with it and have that laugh of his thrown in for good value. Well, the people forgot his Shakespearean triumphs and his drama work; they just sang the old song between their laughing and crying. Then two men helped Sam to half stand, a terrible effort for the dear old chap, but the house rewarded him,— they sobbed louder than ever. All Sam said was, with an echo of the old street gamin laugh, 'Thank 'ee, sirs'— and then he fell back — dead! The excitement was too much . . . and the money will go to the soldiers."

"But that," said Bliss, after Thurley managed to stop sobbing, "isn't the thing that hurts the worst. That was a superb ending — just as Sam himself would have staged it. But the very next day, the leading daily announced they would run a series entitled 'Sam Sparling's Breach of Promise Suits' as told by an 'old beau' — and there you have what I've said in a nut-shell — the wrong the man Sparling did to his better self living after him, the good forgotten, undervalued. All due to the present day system of advertising and standards for artists' personalities."

"What will it be after the war?" Thurley added.

"It will be the duty of every person to discriminate between the army, whether military, spiritual or mental, which has won the cause and what I name the jumbler-in, emotional hoboes who have profiteered or indulged in mental orgies or distorted patriotism in order to market inferior wares—" He was about to say more when Miss Clergy came in, her sharp eyes looking at Thurley's tear-stained cheeks. Being a mere man, Hobart fled!

CHAPTER XXXIV

In September Thurley did go back to the Corners, Miss Clergy with her, but she did not take the maid, the accompanist, the extra motor car with which to startle the natives.

"I keep humming the old tune:

'Home, boys, home, in the old countree,
'Neath the oak and the ash and the spreading maple-tree,'"

she confessed to Bliss the day before she left, "so it's home I'm going and I'll probably race back to town and wonder what madness moved me."

Her concert season did not begin until November, for which she was thankful and with Miss Clergy amicably assenting to the return, Thurley sent word to reopen the Fincherie.

Inspiring her return was the longing to see Dan and Lorraine and the harmony which their child had brought them. Envious though she was and starved with the longing to have some one of her very own, Thurley had come to judge things with a broader gauge. She wanted the satisfaction of saying to Dan that she was glad for him and she understood. She must tell Lorraine that she was truly friends with "the family!"

She knew her world would have ridiculed her ridiculous conscience, deeming it more essential that she reopen the flirtation with the chewing-gum king or find out a more distinctive method of advertising. But to Thurley the contented handshake of Dan Birge and his wife's smile was more to the point. So she drove quietly into

THE GRAY ANGELS

the Corners one warm, early fall day when every color in Dame Nature's paint box had been employed in the bordering trees of the Fincherie lawn. She said to Ali Baba who met them eagerly,

"I've come home again."

Nor did she waver from that manner. She went into the bedrooms and proceeded to settle Miss Clergy and herself with as businesslike an air as her own maid had done, stopping to ask Betsey and Hopeful questions which she knew would please, telling them again and again that it seemed good to "be home."

"I guess you'll find a lot of changes," Betsey said, lingering in the room. "I guess you're changed some yourself," her kind old eyes looking at the girl shrewdly.

"Come, Betsey, you're going to accuse me of growing old! Now what is it — let me hear the worst?"

"No," Betsey pushed her glasses on to the top of her head so as to see the better, "it's a change of heart — like I've heard tell about," unconscious of Thurley's desire both to laugh and cry, "a real change of heart, I guess."

"Was I that bad?" Thurley asked penitently. "I thought only the town drunkards had changes of heart —" she paused, realizing it was not fair to tax Betsey's sense of humor. "It is this, Betsey, I've grown up and with all the wonderful things life has given me, I have no one of my own, so," she finished bravely, "I'm determined to belong to a town. . . . now, Betsey, tell me, what are my chances for having Birge's Corners fall dead in love with me?" amused at Betsey's struggles to be honest yet not offend.

"I guess you give 'em an earful the last time," Betsey began. "You know, Thurley, they ain't up to the new ways — and you — you —"

THE GRAY ANGELS

"You're afraid I don't understand," Thurley hugged her — because she wanted to hug some one and Betsey happened to be handy. "I do understand — but remember the old railway crossing advice, 'stop — look — listen' —" here she handed out a dress pattern for a present and took a deep interest in the debate as to whether there should be box pleats or a circular skirt!

Within a short time Thurley became both unconscious and disinterested as to her own change of heart. For she discovered that here was an opportunity to study first hand and in unsuspected fashion the war madness which was taking its toll of house-and-garden folk destined to do their bit by stay-at-home effort. The news that Dan had a commission did not surprise her beyond a certain pride, almost as if she had been instrumental in her arguments for his going. She thought that Lorraine probably cried a little and tried to convince Dan his duty lay at home because of the boy; she could picture Lorraine's distressed, pretty self as she coaxed Dan not to go "and get killed" and Dan's sentimental side warring with his manhood. At any rate he had gone, so Betsey told her, watching Thurley's face for some evidence as to her state of feeling. Also he was making the very best first lieutenant in the army — for was he not the first commissioned officer from the Corners?

There had been a quota of village lads, some of whom Thurley remembered, who had gone and there was a fudge club organized by the village maidens which yielded weekly so many pounds of sugary delight to be forwarded to the training camps. The social club was a Red Cross center, the lodge rooms were forwarding station for garments and relief funds, no corner of the town but what had scrambled personal possessions into a corner to make way for impersonal duties.

THE GRAY ANGELS

As Thurley saw these evidences in even the shut-in hamlet, she reproached herself for having mere visions of a time far ahead when America should win the violet crown, the time when the future generations would recite in history the events of the war of wars and then say with as much assertion as they told of the enemy's defeat, "A renaissance in art was noted in America during the reconstruction period, art was placed on a more permanent, moral basis, there was a widecut destroying and discouragement of all pursuits and achievements which did not conform to a high moral and spiritual idea. For the first time in the history of the world, our people demanded of artists more than their work, they demanded a conforming to moral law so that the number of art workers became fewer and the public was relieved of superfluous art intriguers whose influence was a menace." So would the children recite and when the teacher would ask: "Who inspired this great movement?" their answer would be, "Bliss Hobart, he named it the violet crown — the crown for supremacy, violet as the ecclesiastics interpret it — for humility."

Thurley could almost fancy she heard the answer being made, as glorious a feat as there ever was to be, to have children speak one's name with admiration, to have shown America over-rich in all physical attributes, as taking for her spoils the greatest lesson of all, re-educating her artists so they might draw on the wonderful and hitherto barely skimmed surface of her astral or mystical energy which lies waiting for all true idealists.

The third day after Thurley's return, when she was card-indexing her thoughts in order to begin her concert tour, wondering how to convince the town that she had returned to be one of them and that no matter how great

THE GRAY ANGELS

the world might call her she did not belong to the world but to Birge's Corners, she finally decided to go to see Lorraine.

She was amused at the situation as she slipped into a frock like the beautiful green blue rust which comes on copper and put a gold piece in her purse for the boy. She, Thurley Precore, like a wistful village spinster, going to call on the son of her erstwhile adorer! And she chose to carry out the illusion by walking through the streets, nodding at passers-by and pretending not to notice their astonished glances.

The Corners could never quite forget the birthday party for Taffy, although Taffy had long since ascended to canine realms above.

She came upon a gathering in front of Dan's store — she had wanted to go inside to buy some trifle and recall the atmosphere of the old days, even if Dan's desk was now locked and deserted, the days when a willful girl used to dance in and call "Cohoo" up at the young proprietor. But there was a platform in front of the showcases and women were sitting on it, all of them in uniforms. They had a barrel for a table, a pitcher of water and glasses, and pamphlets which they flung out into the crowd at intervals. Boy Scouts were standing in line and singing lustily the doughboy favorite, while a small person also in uniform directed them with wild gestures:

Oh, there was a little hen and she had a wooden leg,
The best little hen that ever laid an egg,
And she laid more eggs than any hen on the farm —
And another little drink won't do us any harm —

As the crowd cheered, the small directress turned to face them and speak in a shrill, excited voice about the

THE GRAY ANGELS

need for funds, lapsing into slang when other superlative failed her, striding up and down, her soldier hat on one side and her hair dishevelled. It was Lorraine Birge! Thurley felt as if the world were approaching an end as she discovered the identity of the speaker. Beside Lorraine were Josie Donaldson, Hazel Mitchell and presently Cora Spooner appeared to play an uncertain trombone solo, while a queer youth in white flannels and a dangling eye glass began passing the hat — it was Oweyne Pringle of the art shoppe!

He gurgled his delight when he recognized Thurley. "You'll have to sing for us — the crowd will be twice as generous . . . oh, do, it will please Mrs. Birge."

"Tell Mrs. Birge I will wait for her after the meeting." Thurley weakly dropped the gold piece she had intended for the boy into the offered hat.

After the collection and another shower of pamphlets, Lorraine and her young Coldstream Guards marched off the platform to tack up placards asking for farmerettes and speakerettes to be pressed into service. Then Lorraine dashed over to Thurley — nothing left of the timid little person with a saddish look in her dove-colored eyes. She approached Thurley as hail-fellow well-met, holding out her hand cordially:

"Well, Thurley, you've stolen a march on us. You would have been dragged up here to sing if I'd seen you . . . isn't it glorious?" She paused as if uncertain whether it was the war, the audience or Thurley's frock.

"I was going to call on you," Thurley said gravely.

"Come along — I drive the car now. Yes, indeed, I'm qualifying for an ambulance corps. Come on, girls — this is Thurley Precore who'll boost the subscriptions a lot — you know these girls — Josie, Cora, Hazel

THE GRAY ANGELS

— and, Owen, you stay behind and take in the platform and the barrel.”

They piled into the muddied car while Lorraine whizzed them up the hill. Sentimental thoughts about entering Dan's house, which was to have once been hers, took flight. This new and a trifle mad Lorraine commanded all of Thurley's attention — and sense of humor.

It was amusing to see the desperate way in which she strove to appear mannish, capable, immune to fears as to bumblebees or punctured tires, shouting out commands to her “crew,” the way the crew shouted back opinions and watched Thurley and her frock in semi-envy, semi-disapproval! They left the car before the door and went inside in breathless fashion. Lorraine walked up the pathway with Thurley.

“How can you bury yourself here,” she asked, “when you could be speaking to crowds in New York? I'm going to get there — I can't go overseas because of Dan.” She almost resented the interference!

“I was tired — my head was in a whirl, the season seems a nightmare —”

“Oh, not personal work — the cause we women have championed,” she opened the door as she spoke.

“Where is your boy?” Thurley interrupted.

“Oh, the love — I've a girl to take care of him, I couldn't do both my war work and the boy.” Lorraine went upstairs, her absurd little boots tapping importantly.

The young Coldstream Guardesses waited below, playing the victrola and rummaging for a dish of fudge.

A frowsy headed, sullen girl met them at the head of the stairs. “He's bumped hisself again,” she said by way of greeting.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Then watch him more, Herta," Lorraine was petulant. "Dear me, such a great lad ought to be more steady on his feet, I should think!"

The disordered nursery exhibited traces of a large lunch which Herta had consumed, a novel spread face downward, also for Herta, and the outlines of Herta's recumbent form on the divan. Thurley's face was disapproving as she said swiftly:

"If I were a detective, I could explain why the Boy bumped himself!"

"Oh, Herta's mad about him,— dear me, some days I never see him at all. He's terribly self-willed. I spoiled him those first months because we — we were all so happy," she flushed as she went ahead. "Then Dan went away and I saw my duty as a war worker. I really have lived in the fullest sense since I went in for public work. Thurley, let's be friends—I used to think I envied you because Dan had once loved you so," there was a trace of the old Lorraine as she spoke, but with a surety of opinion which told Thurley that Lorraine's husband now loved only his wife! "Boy made it all so different. Now I envy you because you are free, unhampered, able to do things—I'd be in France if I could."

Herta appeared with Boy in her arms, a splendid little chap if he had had a little more grooming. There were telltale hollows under his pinkish rimmed eyes indicative of nervous spasms, of unattended or unchecked sobs, his hands were soiled and scratched and a blue-black bump stood out over one temple; he tried his best both to abuse and welcome his mother in his incoherent greeting.

"Oh, see his poor head." Thurley took him from the

THE GRAY ANGELS

girl's unwilling arms. "Didn't you put anything on it?" she asked her sharply.

"He's got an awful temper," the girl retorted. "He fights me off for fair. I would have, but he didn't want it — so I let him cry it out."

Lorraine interposed, "It is my own fault — I never left him alone at first and it makes it hard for any one else who looks after him."

Thurley sat down to rock Boy. "I should think you wouldn't let a baby's nerves be an excuse for neglecting him," she said to her own surprise. "He must have sobbed and sobbed — and see," pointing to traces of dried and gooey egg around his mouth.

"Oh, we scrub him up at night — it really doesn't pay to keep him like a doll. . . . I want to show you my letters of recommendation." Lorraine vanished with Thurley following reluctantly, Boy in her arms playing with her sash fringe.

The entire house had the neglected look which the town had prophesied Thurley's house would have should she marry Dan — dust over everything, unpolished floors, a careless air of hurried living, merely existing within the four walls in order to escape without. Herta poked herself after them, with a look of disapproval as she watched Thurley.

When Thurley refused to surrender Boy, but sat down to listen to this new and surprising Lorraine tell of her work and aims, mentioning Dan casually, of how surprised he would be at her development, the young guardesses below set up a chorus of protests and came bounding into the room with a quick hullo to Boy and a "Mercy, what a bruise," settling themselves on the divan to explain their life-work to Thurley.

THE GRAY ANGELS

Of course they were all going overseas — heavens, yes, why Josie and Hazel had their passports and were waiting further orders — didn't Thurley pine to go and sing? Fancy any one's not going if they could . . . they were all going to keep a diary and take a camera, lots of people had smuggled pictures through, they just knew they had. Owen Pringle was going too — he was so jolly and his mother was related to a senator and it had all been arranged for him — these old fogies who said people had better stay home and 'tend to their knitting, who listened to them? — at least, not until it was over . . . just think of the adventures, the sea trip and the chance of being submarined, every one said there were lots of life boats — and the chance to learn French and the friends they would make, particularly moving picture men. Every one said Cora Spooner was as good as Nazimova, only she needed an introduction among the professional set, while the ideas for Josie's war stories — well, all the editors would be cabling her! Josie's mother would have to do the housework because the help had all gone to the munition plants and her aunt's eyes had failed terribly — but of course their day was over and it was Josie's turn to find adventures. Besides, she would lose weight. There was an incentive — she did hate being called Fatty at all the parties. As for Hazel Mitchell — any one who knew what a wonderful god-mother Hazel had been to several Tommies — and what beautiful little things she could do to make every one happy — well, Hazel would walk in and literally back melancholy against the ropes. Of course Lorraine had to stay at home — but she was certainly going to try to speak in larger cities — she wanted to be as much of the great cause as she could be —

THE GRAY ANGELS

Despite the clatter of tongues, Boy's dark little head drooped wearily and he slept the exhausted sleep of a neglected hysteric who feels the sympathetic throb of a woman's breast and can afford to ignore brainless chatter.

Lorraine took Thurley home. The lieutenants were all to stay for tea and start out on an evening campaign.

"We'll have a canned supper — and candy," she said. "I do think I've been a goose to drudge so in the kitchen — but no more of it."

"And when Dan comes home?" Thurley asked in spite of herself.

"The old dear will be so used to soldiers' fare he'll think mine perfection. . . . Good-by, Thurley, do change your mind and give us a benefit sing. Don't worry about Boy, he is all right, I weigh him every week and I am afraid I'll lose Herta if I find too much fault —"

Ali Baba was working in the backyard and Thurley fled with relief to find him busied with currant bushes.

"Ali Baba," she said, stamping her foot, "look at me — tell me, do you see war-madness in my eyes?"

He leaned on his hand cultivator reflectively. "War madness? Land sakes and Mrs. Davis, that's a new one —"

"You have seen fame-madness and vanity-madness and lonesome-madness and even temper-madness in me," Thurley confessed, "but this war-madness, this way of leaving houses undusted and babies unknissed — like Lorraine —"

Ali Baba left the cultivator to come forward. His blue eyes were keen with indignation. "Thurley," he

THE GRAY ANGELS

said, "God bless our women that work and pray for the boys, but I'm gosh-hanged sick of these critters chasing around day and night trying their best to get changed into these here semi-monjays!"

CHAPTER XXXV

When it was time for Thurley to go to New York, Miss Clergy intimated that she would spend the winter at the Fincherie, while the Corners said Thurley had returned "to get cured of something," because she had stayed so at home and the only person in whom she expressed an interest had been Dan Birge's son.

"Oh, no, you must see me in my new opera. I'd be lonesome for you —"

"Lonesome for the baby," Miss Clergy corrected, smiling. "There are dozens of people you can have with you, Thurley — and I'm tired."

So Thurley packed her trunks and told Ali Baba to call her back if Miss Clergy seemed even inclined to want her. The day before she was to leave, she wandered along the shore of the lake, looking at the deserted mansions with a perplexed and disapproving air. She had found much of which to disapprove in the Corners.

It was the queer war-madness in such as Lorraine and her following, destroying common sense and blinding their eyes.

When this restless army returned, whether from overseas or from home service, for return they must, what then of the readjustment? The quiet tragedies that would be lived down slowly, so unsuspectedly — so bravely, really. After every one in the home town had heard their stories and their pictures had been locally printed — what then? They would assume the old jobs, the maddening procedure of "Good morning, help," and "Good morning, boss" — the white shirtwaist on Mon-

THE GRAY ANGELS

day and the pink one on Thursday and the dark silk for best because it is serviceable; the hall bedroom with the respectable family who are always asleep by ten o'clock, the ending of dreams, the failure of the quest, the defeating admission that the circle and not the cross is life's truest symbol.

Surely these people would turn in protest to art as their solace. What a task America had set for her, what herculean effort Bliss must make . . . for these people would appeal to the accepted standards of art as their defense. The plays, poems, stories, songs, pictures, useless bohemian lives that would follow if permitted, the refusal to become one of many — to take an interest in the neighbors and not the enemies!

Thurley rose with sudden determination. Right always ends by acquiring might, she told herself, and if Bliss Hobart possessed a vision he, himself, was powerless to execute it. Player and worker were like the wings of a bird, he had said, equal and necessary . . . then so were dreamer and doer. Thurley could *do* — her ancestors probably toddled about in sabots a few generations ago but she thanked heaven for the sturdy, unknown peasant strain in her which gave her the virility to act. Hobart was the patrician dreamer — yet even gold cannot be used in its purest state, it requires a sterner, coarser alloy before it becomes either practical or fully beautiful.

"After the boys fall out of step," Thurley informed the little lake, "we must fall in step — teach them to go forth once more on a time clock."

"Gray angels" — that was what the people in the vanguard, not only the art vanguard but in all avenues of progress, should be called, — people with enough of the divine in them to have no fear and to believe in the

THE GRAY ANGELS

ultimate success of their ideals, and enough of the human sinner to understand the best earthly way to go about it. Gray angels! The people who can do the needed drudgery which permits others to accomplish the toil-free feats; stay-at-homes were gray angels; the women who did not lift up their voices in egotistical speech-making or in whines but who gave their sons and kept the home in which to welcome them back; those quiet, undersized little chaps with poor eyes or hollow chests who had quietly applied at recruiting stations only to be turned off with a laugh — they were gray angels, staying at the helm to do uninteresting routine which is always needed to keep things afloat, yet applauding those who have achieved the apparently bigger things; and it would be gray angels who should steady the army of men and women who should demand: "What next? We want another great task to do," looking with scorn at a clerk's white apron, an adding machine, a modest millinery store!

The gray angels dyke a nation's forceful common sense from becoming a flood of useless sentiment, expending itself no one knows where, lost to practical purposes. It would be the gray angels who would help win the violet crown because they gauge nothing in misleading blacks or whites, since life on this planet is not expressed in harsh, sweeping tones, but in neutral grays, partaking of both white and black, now foggy and bewildering, now serene and sweetly sad with lavender veiling, or rosy flecked and hopeful.

Bliss was a gray angel — Ernestine, Polly, Collin and Caleb had the possibilities of becoming them.

. . . "I believe I'm a gray angel, too," Thurley thought with sudden delight.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Thurley had lingered at the Fincherie until the time grew so short she knew she must rush into her concert work without her customary rehearsals. She had word from Bliss Hobart that he was on his way West to speak for patriotic matters and arrange some musical things and he had left some music for her and advice as to a difficult new rôle.

His letter did not create in Thurley the usual rebellion against Bliss's reserved self or her own foolish pledge. She was too busy casting ahead for coming events, wondering how her opportunity would arrive in which to prove her gray angel self and best to help Bliss's vision to become practically demonstrated.

She said good-by with reluctance to Dan's son and his foolish, ineffectual little mother whose head was temporarily in a whirl of excitement. Lorraine was to face readjustment as much as the man who would return to civilian life minus an arm. It seemed to Thurley that perhaps here was where gray angel demonstration must begin — to stop Lorraine's neglect of her home and child, and convince her that when Dan came back expecting to find the same gentle wife whose house was her kingdom and whose outlook on life would be his tempering element — she must not fail him.

Yet Lorraine seemed beyond reason. Josie, Hazel, Cora and Owen, with another handful of equally feather-weight mental calibre, had gone on their way rejoicing, they had had a farewell banquet with speeches made

THE GRAY ANGELS

about their being "patriotic pilgrims" and had fitted bags presented as tokens of esteem . . .

Thurley found intriguers and hysterical hikers in full swing in the city, but it was good to have a hum of life and progress once again. Caleb dropped into tell of the success of "The Patriotic Burglar" which had gone into six editions.

"Have you read it?" he asked, snuggling in an easy chair.

She shook her head. "What do you hear from Ernestine? Collin wrote a postal which I found when I came in from the Corners."

Caleb laughed. "I don't think Beethoven and Bach will make a hit; Ernestine will pack up her music in her kit bag and blow back . . . but you ought to read my book — it was like rolling off a log to write it —"

Thurley frowned.

"Any other time it would have been too thin to have got by, but every subway advertises it and there is a stampede outside the bookstores. I have raked in a harvest."

The gray angel of Thurley prompted a reproof.

"What's wrong?" he demanded gaily. "You're too pretty to scold."

"It is cheating to write drivel — when Bliss's and Ernestine's ideals for you —"

Caleb rose. "I'm off," he had a petulant air like Mark's flippant unrest. "If people want what I write, they shall have it! We may as well have as good a time as we can; it seems to be the main thing these days."

After he left Thurley sat oblivious to telephones or unanswered mail, forgetting the Corners and Miss Clergy and Ali Baba's pride as he had driven her to the station.

THE GRAY ANGELS

She was considering as a judicial gray angel this question of eternally having a good time which was a cancer spot in national common sense.

Now that the tide was turning rapidly towards peace and victory, a call was being made so stupendous and half mystical that perhaps women could best hear and understand since their ears are attuned to children's unworded, sobbed wants. It was the call to declare themselves as gray angels and to work together for the banishment of the good time menace, to show the world, non-fighting and veterans, that it is good to be ordinary, to return to "life as usual" instead of staying breathless with excitement, unjustly halo-clad, scornful of humdrum duties and rebelling at the inevitable readjustment. By this women should come to see things as they are, not as they would wish them to be.

Dusk crept on Thurley unawares. She started up as the maid came in to hand her a telegram. She knew before she opened it. Miss Clergy was dead.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"She went to sleep-like," Ali Baba told her, after the simple funeral. "She wasn't what you would call in pain — just sighing and calling for people dead these forty years. She says to Hopeful, 'The Watcher of the Dead has seen me' — and we knew then it was the end."

"What about the watcher of the dead?" Thurley said softly.

"The watcher must have some one to keep him company and when the last one that has died has stayed with him long enough and goes away, they do say the watcher goes about the village looking into faces to see in which lies the shadow of death — and he loses no time in taking him so that he will have company. Miss Clergy remembered the story. She went to sleep sayin', 'Tell Thurley — to — use — her — own — judgment.'"

"Ali Baba — did she —" Thurley grasped his arm.

He nodded. "Just like I said — 'Tell — Thurley — to — use — her — own judgment,' — and then she looks up at me and she says, 'An hour's drive, Ali Baba — not too fast.'" His rough hand was across his eyes.

"Are you quite *sure*, Ali Baba, that she knew what she was saying?"

"As sure as I am what you are askin'," the old man answered.

Miss Clergy's will was dated the year that Thurley went with her to New York. It left, requiring neither bond nor security, everything to Thurley Precore.

THE GRAY ANGELS

But the excitement over the death and the disposal of the fortune was increased by Thurley's prompt use of it. Even the war lost its prominence when Thurley in remarkably short time gave out a statement declaring her intentions.

Her contracts would be kept but after the present season Thurley Precore was to retire for a year at least, in which she would devote herself — secretly, she whispered, "to being a gray angel and helping Bliss," but to the public she named it "to the philanthropic enterprise which, with Miss Clergy's money, was to be started."

She wrote Bliss Hobart as school-girlish and impulsive a note as one could imagine, setting forth her gray angel theories in superlative fashion, even underlining and putting exclamation points in pairs and punctuating sentences by a wriggling up and down mark which she said he was to consider as "a grin."

"Of course you'll be rushed to death when this reaches you," she concluded, "but you must hear me out. Remember, I listened to all you told me! Never could I spend all that money for myself nor in a sense would it be right. Miss Clergy should have lived down her disappointment, married and raised her boys to fight and her girls to wait and serve. Why should I, stranger that I am, use the money for personal pleasures? I will not even buy a bankrupt title with it." Here she drew a very large "grin" mark.

"I am buying all the deserted lake houses — we have begun negotiations for them and together with the Fincherie there will be a little city of ex-soldiers learning new trades, forgetting empty sleeves and wheel-chair means of travelling, shell shock, snagged souls — all the wilful things which prevent settling down to every day living.

"It seems to me, Bliss Hobart, it will always be up to one-tenth of the world to look after the other nine-tenths — so this enter-

THE GRAY ANGELS

prise will not end as the tapping of crutches dies away. The soldiers must, of necessity, come first. But there is to be a permanent 'practical art' colony there — to teach all who need to be taught the thing best fitted for him — or her. (Grin mark.) There are to be 'hers'!

"Life may be shorn of fineries and extravagances and it may be simple — but it need never be sordid and unendurable and that is what I shall try to prove. My heart is set on having flower beds of deep, purple violets and mignonette for the lawns, sun dials with comforting mottoes — there will be a task — the carving of them. I want the one before the Fincherie itself to read:

" 'And as our years do run apace,
Let us love God
And live in peace.'

"Do you like it? (Grin mark.)

"I shall have huge, copper lanterns to light the roads at night, there must be yellow ivy and gorse about the walls and cool, gray lavender as a background for pink ramblers and yellow tea roses and, oh, gray angel, I must have a wind screen of willows. I shall build a great archway in the middle of the estate and a stone fence encircling it all. Over the archway I want a thick, oak slab with this motto cut in by a master hand: 'God gave them a great thing to do — and they did it.'

"In each house there shall be particular equipment for particular occupations. Children's theaters — and fine weaving — carving of wood and ivory and copying brocades. Just see the work to be done, the joy of it — and the pity, too! There must be a bee farm and a poultry annex and I've a regular bag of tricks up my sleeve. I've Ali Baba as overseer — Betsey and Hopeful as managers — and myself (grin mark) to demonstrate the practical worth of your vision.

"For you are the dreamer and I the doer. We are, in our relations, the same as that of science towards theology: 'Nous nous saluons mais nous ne parlons pas.' Is it not so? (Wee grin mark.) You speak but you are afraid to do and I am afraid to

THE GRAY ANGELS

speak but I must do. There, write me you will come to my Fincherie and see my children and give us your blessing,

“THURLEY.”

She received her answer via wire the night she returned to New York unwillingly to sing her first concert.

“Not a gray angel but white. Wait until I can say not write it.
“B. H.”

All New York whispered that “the Precore voice” was more ravishing than ever, particularly when it sang love songs!

While Thurley bustled about between her season and her remodelling of the lake colony and assembling her new family, the original family underwent some thrilling events.

Hobart was taken unawares with a fresh budget of duties which kept him West without respite, although he went so far as to send Thurley numerous flowergrams and offer donations towards her Fincherie, writing notes in which he demanded more details as to the work and advice as to her career.

Polly Harris had a mysterious surprise which resolved itself into a great success. It was not the grand opera that Polly stubbornly dreamed of during the lean years of struggle; without warning, she composed and had published camp songs which roused the country to topnotch enthusiasm. They were jingles, really, but with sincere sentiments, a tinge of humor and a vigorous little melody — they sprang from the depths of Polly’s loyal heart, bravely relinquishing opera ambitions because “a song fights as well as an army,” she decided, locking her attic door and preparing to drudge.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I feel light-headed," she informed Thurley when she came to the latter's apartment to tell all about it. "As if I were going to open my eyes to find myself in a dentist's chair, following the taking of old fashioned laughing gas while I lost a wisdom tooth! That it would be the same 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the broad 'igh-way' for yours truly! Oh, don't ask how I wrote them — how do you sing or Bliss direct — or Collin paint?" she added softly.

"Come, sit in my lap, Polly," said Thurley suddenly. "I've always wanted to have you, you're such a feather-weight and I'm so huge. I always wanted to capture you and make you hear me out. You don't know how glad I am for you and what wonderful things are ahead for every one." She beckoned so enticingly that Polly, the same, unspoiled Polly in brown smock and shabby boots, perched herself on Thurley's knee while they talked it all out. The Fincherie Colony and Hobart's precious dreams, the useless, selfish work Caleb was doing, Ernestine's amusingly complaining letters, Lissa's lack of success in finding a duke or a blue-blooded patroness, the threat that she might have to cut her hair short if she was really going to stay — what would become of that lazy rascal of a Mark? — and here was Collin giving no one a hint as to what he was doing. And then Polly flushed and she said awkwardly:

"Perhaps he will come to care a little, now, Thurley — success sometimes makes people seem different — more desirable, doesn't it? I know it ought not to be the bait — but when you have cared so long — you are reckless. Money never brings a person the real things, does it?" And Polly began to sob, as she had refrained from sobbing for years while Thurley rocked her in her arms, playing comforting gray angel and understanding woman

THE GRAY ANGELS

all in one. They ended quite normally by a heated argument as to whether Polly should or should not — now that she was to be placed on a pedestal with Francis Scott Key — wear a distinctive costume while she toured the country and sang her songs — say a bright red sailor and a blue cloth cape with a single line of white braid — and didn't she feel ashamed to make such distressing faces because Thurley was planning a pink chiffon evening dress for her — base ingratitude of these newly arrived!

So Polly toured the country in the costume Thurley designed, singing her songs and meeting with success, while music shops plastered their windows with Polly Harris' latest, and news of her triumph echoed in the trenches to startle Ernestine into cabling congratulations and Lissa into groaning in envy. Polly was to join Bliss in San Francisco for a spring campaign and, when she visited Thurley at the Fincherie, she took endless photographs and mental notes of the colony with which to regale him, asking if there was any special message Thurley wished him to have.

"How wonderfully it is coming on! How kind every one is and workmen seem to do wonders in no time! We shall have the last house restored by July — and tell him we have two hundred boys here and they say they never want to move along —"

"I mean personal message," Polly interrupted.

Thurley shook her head.

"I'll use my own judgment," Polly added, not knowing how dangerously near she came to repeating words of grave and liberating importance.

The third event of the family happened in June when Ernestine and Caleb met each other at the steamer pier. Having faced reality and realized what she was not

THE GRAY ANGELS

capable of doing, Ernestine was flying home in honest haste to try to do what she felt was her duty.

She looked forward to meeting Caleb as the same sentimental person who would propose to her before they had passed down the gangway. Ernestine had discovered that reality, while a stern friend at first, was a sincere and lasting one. The ooze had vanished from her scheme of things since she faced the horrors of — not war — but of the jumblerers-in such as Lissa and Mark and the hysterical young things from Birge's Corners. She had even come across Hortense Quinby who was occupied by making intellectual love to a thick-set young private who contemptuously accepted her affection with the excuse, "An educated dame is better than no one — but when I get back to my girl in Harlem —" while Hortense told herself that this Jo Carter had a soul above being an elevator boy; his was a spirit destined to lead men; and she tried to check his constant assault on the King's English and planned on being his "fairy god-mother" when he should return to America! Ernestine had watched with disapproval the onslaught of débutantes upon the regulars who accepted the adoration with scornful grins and conceited smirks, allowing these delicately bred and reared young creatures who had been so bored or misunderstood by their families, to lavish their attentions on them unchecked. She had seen, by way of contrast, the capable, heroic men and women who managed with admirable tact to suppress these feverish young things from doing their worst and yet not allow them to escape without a whirl at the grindstone. Ernestine looked upon these young things as one does at straggling boys, stray dogs and hoboos who invariably follow the wind-up of any dignified and splendid procession, tagging

THE GRAY ANGELS

after and convinced in their own minds they are attracting as much attention as the mounted police who swish along in advance.

Having looked honestly at reality and judged it fairly, Ernestine had honestly judged of both her former and her present self. She felt she could never return to the unreal, intensive selfishness which she had fostered and excused under the title of "being different"—that she could greet Caleb in almost flapper fashion, saying,

"Here I am, ready to marry you! Let's have a general confession. First, one Caleb Patmore has never done his best work—but he will. Secondly, one Ernestine Christian has been a neurotic, selfish soul but she is going to reform."

Caleb met her, to be sure. But before he spoke she knew some catastrophe had happened in his affairs. As he piloted her to her apartment, trying to ask interested questions, and saying that she looked fagged and he thanked heaven she was not going for public talks, Ernestine waited for him to speak of himself.

To her amazement, he would have left her at the doorway. But she took his arm, as Thurley might have done, in impulsive fashion and commanded him to come inside.

Rather unwillingly, he obeyed, telling about Thurley and her "rather far-fetched scheme," and Polly's success and her tour of the country with Bliss who must be "completely out of his element" boasting for this and that and actually prophesying a near and sudden peace. Had she seen much of Mark? How was Lissa getting on? And where was Collin,—no need for him to rush over to fight beside bricklayers!

"What has happened," Ernestine asked. "You are trying to lie to me—by silence. Don't—don't you

THE GRAY ANGELS

care any more?" feeling a reluctance to speak of her own change of heart.

"Of course, but you can't love a beggar," he flung back roughly. "You don't mean to say that when it's too late you've come back prepared to marry a bankrupt — a failure," his teeth gritted together.

"What are you babbling of? Please don't be like a Henry James conversation, say it! I've learned to honor directness of speech and action."

"I'll oblige you and take my leave. The damned public is as fickle as a weather vane. They raved over my 'Patriotic Burglar'—I made more off of it than any three of my other books. The public couldn't get enough of it. And I went ahead, as I always do," this with insolent assurance, "on my next best seller, 'Military Molly'—no plot but a pretty girl, German spy and Yankee hero — it is enough for these days — there was to be a red, white and blue cover on it and Molly in her nursing costume. And the firm refused it! They dared to say the tide has turned against war fiction, people felt reality too keenly to want imaginary woes and victories pictured for them — they said that to me, Caleb Patmore," he was unconscious of his absurdity, "when my books have made more money for them than any other author they have. They said it was thin and I had better take a long rest . . . that an editor's greatest need in the world was to discover whether or not an author was trying to kid himself and to disillusionize him as quickly and painlessly as possible —" he tried to laugh.

"That is not so bad," Ernestine said quietly, "it had to come some time. Rest for a year and then see what your viewpoints are."

"But I'm stony broke! I never dreamed I'd be turned down! They dared tell me the story had nothing to

THE GRAY ANGELS

commend it save questionable cleverness in nomenclature. . . . Why, I was hard to convince when they first wrote me; I had made some bad plays on the stock market — I counted on 'Military Molly' to pull me out of the hole and my next book, 'The Battles of Billy Girl,' to get me back to where I was a year ago. I guess there will never be any more of my books, unless some one stakes me to publish independently and every one shies when you hint of it . . . would you, Ernestine?"

"Not if you were never to speak to me."

He gave a half snarl, half exclamation. "You always wanted to see me a failure! Enjoy yourself," — picking up his hat.

"Caleb, I came back because I was not needed over there. I came back to be a real woman — and my first job is to make you a real man. I shall marry you, almost before I unpack my trunks, and proceed to show you that the really great things in life are never written out; that your firm have had the courage, no matter what their motive, to show you the truth, and your wife is going to see that you follow it!"

As he stared at her, half enraged and half delighted, he realized that here spoke a new and rejuvenated woman and artist combined. The clever, sallow face was blushing prettily and there was something softly beautiful in the dark eyes.

At that moment neither knew they were about to join Thurley's angel-band and with the gray angels not to sing — but to do.

"Suppose I'm a permanent failure, grumbling and jealous of your success and bitter towards the world at large? You want to take such a risk? And it is a risk, laugh all you wish and shake your head, I'm terribly done

THE GRAY ANGELS

up, feel gone to bits, brain of an oyster and my nerves are shaky —”

“ You remind me of nothing more terrible, Caleb, than the picture over which the world has often smiled: the tiny lad sitting on a doorstep and murmuring in hopes cruel relatives will overhear and be grief-stricken and remorseful, ‘ I’m going into the garden to eat worms! ’ And we all know, relatives included, what a stampede indoors there would be if some one called out, ‘ But, oh, Jack, before you do, let’s go to the circus and have pink lemonade —’.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Thurley, Polly and Bliss Hobart were taking a turn about the Fincherie gardens to discuss a multitude of detail, whether or not Caleb and Ernestine Patmore, gay deceivers to be married all in a moment and never let any one know, would visit the Fincherie as soon as Ernestine's letter intimated. Why had Collin and Mark stopped writing? Didn't the exhibition of doll houses for the coming Christmas market speak well for the work being done? And if Hobart had spoken in favor of the leather department, Polly championed the wireless school and the brass and copper hand industries. She had shown favoritism, as well, for she sang three songs for those boys and only two and a half for the others.

Thurley drew their attention to a newly finished sundial. "You see," she said, as they took chairs within a summer house, "it is getting used to one's self that is the trick. We all have to do it in some way or other at some time. I dare say if one were born with four fingers and an extra one appeared without warning, it would be quite a task to know how to provide for the newcomer . . . besides, they all feel it has been worth while," she added, turning her eager, flushed face towards Bliss Hobart.

"Why hasn't the town put up a statue of you?" asked Polly. "Do people salaam when they meet you?"

"Well, they don't mind saying I belong to Birge's

THE GRAY ANGELS

Corners — reward sufficient." Thurley stood up to wave a welcoming arm to a small person in flowered organdie and a huge shade hat, who was making her way across the lawn, squired by her todding son.

"I want you to meet Lorraine Birge," she explained swiftly. "Lorraine is my right hand man — now." She did not add what had happened — the awful, furious moment when Lorraine was summoned home from public speaking to witness the result of Herta's carelessness regarding Boy — the fall from the window with the fractured arms as a result. It had banished the war-madness; the old, gentle Lorraine, with an added strength of purpose perhaps born of her tiny sojourn into the world, returned for all time. With Thurley as her "guardian angel," she once more recreated her house as Dan had left it — and would expect it — nursing her child, shaking her head firmly when committees asked when she would join them once again!

Lorraine hesitated when she saw the strangers, but Boy ambled along to garrote Hobart's watch chain and with his fingers clutch Polly's red hat brim so there was no chance for further reserve and the quartette sat chatting of the Fincherie work, and of the future art colony soon to be in evidence until the chimes struck five and Lorraine bundled her son under her arm and made for her motor car.

"Isn't she the wife of — of —" Polly asked curiously.

"Of Dan," Thurley admitted. "She most surely is — and we are the best of friends. Not even Dan could come between us! We each made a mistake, and then unmade it, and that inspired us with mutual pity and admiration,— understand?"

"When are you going to sing next?" Bliss Hobart asked.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"When I have time! Don't bother me about singing. I'm so busy and so happy that I haven't time to plan."

Ali Baba, important in a new uniform, came across the lawn to tell Thurley the New York train had brought her four guests.

"You'll be real glad to see three of them, and real sorry to see the fourth," he whispered patronizingly, "the fourth is that artist — he's blind!"

Polly sprang to her feet. "I knew it — I knew it," she said breathlessly.

It was quite true. The over brilliant, joyous eyes faced the darkness for all time. Mark Wirth had acted as his courier and as the trio came into the reception room, Ernestine and Caleb stood in the background and Collin tried to smile at them while Mark raised his hand to suppress their exclamations.

"We've come to belong to Ali Baba's forty thieves," said Ernestine, to break the silence. "We're as tired and hungry as four people can be. Collin has splendid things to tell you, he is very shy about letting us know how wonderful he has been." Her voice broke and she looked at Caleb to take up the burden.

But Caleb was staring at Collin, whose sensitive face quivered as a woman's does before she cries. He made no response.

Hobart came and took his hand. "I'm mighty proud of you, old man; you get yourself rested up and forget the haughty beauties waiting to be painted in their best togs. . . . You'll have to be a sculptor in spite of yourself."

"The master said, 'All an artist needs is to trust his eyes,'" Collin repeated.

"Ah, but his inner eyes — which never dim," Thur-

THE GRAY ANGELS

ley corrected, coming over to kiss his cheek. "Here is Polly waiting to kiss you on both cheeks. Why, Collin, you've just come home twice as precious; that's all, isn't it? — just come home."

Polly stood back, afraid that his hands would reach up to touch her cheeks and discover the tears.

"I want Polly." Collin said suddenly. "Where is she?"

Hobart gave her an imperative nudge.

"We bother Polly from being her best," he said softly. "Let's clear. . . . Polly's the only one to make Collin get used to himself."

In the late evening, Thurley and Mark came back into the house, after Mark had "talked her head off" in the garden and as she said good night, she added,

"To think you're going to do something that will make the worth-while world claim you!"

"If it's really not too late to study law," he lapsed back into uncertainty.

"I've come to believe that nothing worth while is ever too late, it may not be in just the way we had planned or preferred, but if the right effort is made, the result follows. . . . Mark, what wonderful things another person's tragedy can inspire!"

"It has been Collin mostly — and Lissa's awful selfishness! Besides, Ernestine is really human and Caleb follows her about like a lamb. She'll have him writing something ripping if he's not careful."

Hobart was reading in the study and he came in to where they were and said that Thurley was too fagged to stay up another moment.

"Which means you want to talk to Mark and being a woman, I'm a hindrance," she laughed, slipping away.

THE GRAY ANGELS

In her room, she found Polly a funny muddle of rose-colored negligee, handkerchiefs rolled into moist little balls, and curl papers, oddly enough! Ernestine was trying to argue with her, but Polly's head was among the cushions of Thurley's chaise longue and only smothered sobs escaped at intervals.

Ernestine gave a sigh of relief as Thurley entered. "Do make her behave! Polly dear, you must be brave, as you used to be about your own affairs. We all know how hard you care. We just want you to keep on caring, and it might have been worse. Why, Collin's soul isn't bruised; now Caleb's was," she added honestly.

"How did he ever marry you?" Polly managed to ask.

"I ordered it, as you must — mustn't she, Thurley? It's her duty."

Thurley slipped down beside Polly. "A gray angel can ask a man to marry her as easily as she can knit him a sweater," she whispered. "Collin needs you; he must use his talents wisely and only some one who really will belong to him can make him prove his worth."

After Polly halfway promised that she would find the shortest, most forceful method of requesting marriage to a blind hero who could become a sublime poet in deathless stone and bronze, Ernestine departed to find Caleb in a changed, softened mood in which he admitted that when a chap witnessed such a tragedy — and such rose-colored clouds encircling it, who saw what Thurley had done, forgetting herself and her career, and the men at the Fincherie quietly getting used to themselves and 'life as usual' all about, it made him realize what a smashing story could be written about such real people. Caleb had awakened to his possibility of being a vigorous realist.

Thurley turned off the lights in her room and opened

THE GRAY ANGELS

the window to commune with the genial moon. She wondered if Bliss Hobart would ever be in dire need of gray angel courtship. . . . The memory of Miss Clergy's message, "Tell Thurley to use her own judgment," caused the color to flood her tired cheeks . . . she almost hoped he would not — it would be so very splendid to have Bliss Hobart plead his own cause . . . she was only a small part gray angel, she admitted, she was mostly — just Thurley!

CHAPTER XXXIX

Thurley returned to New York in October to sing some engagements. The public clamored for her until one engagement seemed naturally to lead to another and after the signing of the armistice, Thanksgiving Day confronted her, recalling her to the Fincherie to help the celebration to be as perfect as possible. Besides, Lorraine had written that Dan was home, a slight heart trouble as the reason, but otherwise the same splendid Dan, and Lorraine was waiting to confide in Thurley all that had happened.

"So you cannot be induced to stay any longer?" Bliss asked, as she came into his studio to say good-by.

"I'm not as needed here as at the Fincherie — and then, Dan Birge is home and I want to see him," she admitted honestly. "So don't dare dig up another date for me until after the New Year. I must stay at home that long for I'm to be Mrs. Santa Claus, you see; even he has been ousted by the new women!"

"I won't see you for a long time," he objected drolly. "And you look to-day like the little girl of six years ago when you explained how you wintered with the circus and then sang hymns until I thought I had discovered the Yogi trick of having one's soul slip out of the body and wander at will — that I was listening at Saint Peter's key-hole —"

"So I please you," she answered seriously.

"Of course. I knew you would," his hand touched the little idol which had always remained on his desk.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"It was just that I dreaded the inevitable transition period; so many women never rise above it to find the gray angel part of themselves —"

"Ernestine did," Thurley murmured.

"Ah, she is a gray angel of gray angels! Fancy her making Caleb stop his fulsome tales and write real things!"

"But she hasn't played a concert! Must she sacrifice her talent, too?"

"No, it is like anything worth while. It takes much personal endeavor to get it started. When Caleb has begun to wear alpaca house-coats and put bird-houses in all his trees and talk of the uplift and vegetable diets, Ernestine can safely scamper back to her piano and play as she never has before. . . . They, too, are proving my vision," he added.

"So is Collin with his wife Polly, and Mark, so would Sam Sparling had he been able to stay among us. It is a simple thing to prove when you really understand the compensations."

"And Mark has proved the falseness of Lissa's love and —"

"You are talking like an old-fashioned valentine. Dear, dear, this will never do." She fastened her dull red cape with its banding of fur.

"Don't go, I've so many things to tell you. I used to be afraid to whisper my ideas to any one; therefore, they were useless. And now, I simply won't allow myself to keep an idea over night. I must tell it to you — and have you prove it out. . . . Thurley, do you remember the day at Blessed Memory when we walked to the sea and —"

She looked at her watch. "I must go, Bliss, I've promised to say good-by to Caleb and Ernestine and to

THE GRAY ANGELS

see how much Collin has done on his statue — Polly says it is wonderful."

He escorted her to the door, but before he opened it he said in serious tone, "Are you going to flirt with Dan again?"

"Always! I adore him as I adore no one else! He is an inspiration and a Punch and Judy show all in one," adding as she slipped away, "Perhaps we were talking at cross purposes. I mean Dan junior!"

The night she returned to the Fincherie she gave a concert for Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves in the newly added community room, some of the village hearing of the event and straying in to listen.

Not until the end of the programme did she see Dan Birge and Lorraine. Impulsively, Thurley sang, "Coming Through the Rye," looking at them in whole-souled friendship.

As the hall was clearing, Thurley flew down to find them.

"Oh, Dan," she held on to his hands, "it is yourself for certain, I'm so terribly glad!" She read in his dark eyes the shadow which will rest on most of those who have fought and returned, a dangerous expression liable to turn into haunted, ugly memories, desperate longings and unwise impulses.

Lorraine wondered if Thurley read the same problem which she had discerned even while he was kissing her his welcome.

"It is mighty good to be back," was all he said. "A man doesn't know what he is going to miss until it is too late. But you've done a wonderful thing. Lorraine tells me it is to be permanent." Yet the dangerous expression of his eyes seemed to ridicule his own praise.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"Don't you think Lorraine looks well?" Thurley asked to cover the pause.

"Yes, Lorraine is always the same, thank fortune! The Boy is the only one who has changed."

Lorraine flushed, thinking all in an instant of how dangerously near she had come to being forever changed, emancipated, as Hortense Quinby would have called it, leaving her fireside untended to pursue phantoms of restless imagination. She smiled in understanding at Thurley as Dan began to say what a splendid overseer Ali Baba made and how good it was to see the old town and surely if Miss Clergy could understand, she would be well pleased with Thurley's disposal of her fortune. As he talked, he rested his weight first on one foot and then the other, his eyebrows twitching and his hands working together and when Thurley asked as to his own condition, he was brusque almost to rudeness in refusing to consider it of importance.

"If I had only got bumped good and proper," he declared, "I wouldn't mind, but I hate this sort of air cushion, cruel invaliding of a man. . . . Of course you can't understand because you haven't been into things. It's the same as a race horse sold to a cabstand and made to trot slowly to the station with a burden of nervous spinsters!"

Thurley understood the meaning of his expression and the readjustment he must face. She mercifully let Dan go on his way, while Ali Baba swept down on her to report all that had and had not happened during her absence.

Dan and Lorraine walked home that mild November night, Lorraine clinging to his arm until he slouched his shoulder as if the attitude annoyed him.

"Does it make you tired?" she asked wistfully.

THE GRAY ANGELS

"No, it seems too damned civilized," he flung back to her dismay.

"Why — Dan!"

He halted to light a cigar before he tried to explain, then walked with long strides and a slight scuffling of the feet. Lorraine had to half run in order to keep abreast.

"Dan, tell me, is there something you are keeping back? I'm brave, I'm really braver than you think, I can understand things, truly, I can, tell me —" She was trying not to cry.

"Nothing more than any man has to face when he's been in the thick of things and returns to a two-by-four existence. Can you go into the store to listen to women haggle over prices and men fuss about neckties, when all of you tingles with what you've seen and helped to do? It is just that you've grown beyond your home town. Yet the heart-part of you wants to come back to it and stay loyal and content . . . maybe that's not clear — it's such a queer thing. We beggars moon about homesickness and sit about campfires and almost crucify ourselves with longing to be home and our letters promise you it will be, 'Home, Hoboken or hell' by this time or that. . . . You'd think we'd rush home and remain one glad grin! But we don't. Part of us does — the heart-part of us that demands admiring relatives — the very dearest wife and child in the world," he reached out to touch her arm as he almost strode by her, "but there is another part of us — whether wounded or not, that part is there — the primitive part that has to be roused in order to go over the top, — it can't demobilize by an officer's command, it has to die down — slowly — just wear away, a fretting, gnawing longing to go shoot up the town, wallow in mud as you hike, hike, hike after some one —

THE GRAY ANGELS

catch the some one — maim him . . . maybe kill him,” he was talking more to himself, “to have the boom-boom of guns waken you and put you to sleep, see slaughter about you and chaos and every universal law turned inside out and yourself in the center of it . . . and that part will have to be conquered by every true soldier. And who is going to help him? He’ll love home folks the same and all the civilized comforts and fun-making — but sometimes that other part of him will battle against being chained back into silence. It’s the same as the call of the East or the mountaineer’s nostalgia when he has to live in flat country, a state of mind, Lorraine; don’t be frightened, I shouldn’t have bothered you with it —”

They had reached their gate and Dan flung it open with a clatter.

“Let’s sit out on the steps for awhile, will you?” he urged. “Four walls stifle me. If I was sure of my nerve, I’d run the car until morning through dark roads — fast as the wind —” He gave a jangling laugh as he settled himself on the steps.

“Poor Dan,” Lorraine sobbed, trying to gather all of him in her arms.

“Poor little Lorraine, you can’t understand. A fine mess I’ve been for you anyhow, first trying not to love you, not understanding nor appreciating you; then when Boy came and I knew your worth and my love for you and what a splendid pal Thurley was, but just a pal, and then the war, and now —”

“But I do understand,” she told him swiftly, “I do, indeed. . . . Dan, you don’t know all that has happened — about me. They’ll tell you fast enough, so let me prepare you. When you were gone, instead of grieving and waiting, I, too, found a primitive part of me . . . it was the women all about me that roused it, the women

THE GRAY ANGELS

going overseas, making speeches, parading in uniforms — and I deliberately neglected our boy! Yes, I did! Ask father, for he disapproved but I would not listen. It was all something I don't quite understand now, but a mighty powerful something while it lasted, and it was Thurley who taught me the lesson," Lorraine continued in her sweet, even voice, neither sparing herself nor softening the details. Finally, she ended,

"Even now, loving you a thousand times harder and adoring Boy, content always to be the homemaker, happy in it, there is, sometimes, a faint longing to go forth and do, what shall I name it? And so, I do understand your primitive part, Dan, and I shall be patient with it. . . . Perhaps it was worth the making the mistake to be able to understand you."

He gathered her in his arms. "Lorraine," he whispered, "we both understand —"

So they sat like two jolly, sentimental ghosts, until dawn filtered through dark clouds, talking as they had never talked before, of intangible, personal doubts and resolves, of many happy things to come and of the mistakes which lay behind.

"You know the feeling, Dan! You have been big and keen enough to analyze it," Lorraine summarized. "Now help other men to become used to 'life as usual.' Thurley calls stay-at-homes and quiet workers 'gray angels' because we are considered ineffectual, simply keeping things going. You can be a gray angel, Dan. It's the most peaceful feeling in the world! Help the boys at Thurley's Fincherie to be average men, neither heroes nor martyrs, talk to them as only a man who is one of them can talk,—there lies your duty and your salvation."

"I will," Dan promised, "if you will talk to *me*!"

CHAPTER XL

The Fincherie Christmas tree had been a great success with a Mrs. Santa Claus in a foam of tulle and lace instead of an apple-dumpling gentleman in a red jerkin and leather boots.

Every one had everything, so the rumor went, and Thurley sang carols until she repeated "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" for the third time and fled in self-defence.

Bliss Hobart had come into the Corners unexpectedly that morning and, after Thurley's exit, he stood up to suggest three cheers for the Fincherie gray angel, which were given by a happy, well fed community who began to think about the joys of sleep.

Ali Baba, who had always placed Hobart high in personal esteem, tramped over to inform him that Thurley was in the little breakfast room of the original Fincherie.

Hobart moved in that direction with alacrity. He found Thurley sorting over a bundle of letters.

"If you hadn't come to the Fincherie," she began, "I should have come to New York to ask you what to do with these people?" She held out some of the letters.

He glanced at them. "Oh, managers will badger any one who has been a gold mine — that's to be expected. I, myself, was to make a faint protest about too much retirement, but when Mrs. Santa Claus has been a real joy spreader, it isn't fair to harass her, is it?"

"None of you can bother me overly much. I'm re-

THE GRAY ANGELS

solved to sing just enough to make people always want me, and *live* enough to be able to sing my best. There! ”

“ May you follow that advice! But let’s talk about sentimental things. I always find myself slipping this time of the year.” He sat beside her.

“ Stoical dreamer! I’m just beginning to understand you.”

“ You didn’t give me a Christmas present.”

“ You didn’t give me one,” she began.

But he drew a small box from his pocket and presented it.

“ Why, Bliss! ” She was too pleased to conceal her delight. She opened it to find a locket of palest gold with a fine, shining chain. The locket yielded to the pressure of her thumb and within was space for some loved one’s face, while on the other side was made in bas relief an enamelled violet crown.

“ You think I — really — have —” she began.

“ I do, and I think I really want you to marry me,” he said very positively. “ I don’t want you to answer by quoting a half mad woman’s request made to an untutored girl. Will you marry me, Thurley, battered old dreamer of nearly forty who hadn’t the courage to put into execution what he thought, who had to tell it to a gray angel who went and did? Will you? ”

“ Let’s talk about Ernestine and Caleb’s new book; or Collin’s statue of Polly that is so marvellous, or Mark,— did you know he really is on the road to right? Let me tell about Dan, how invaluable he has become to every one in the town, saying just the right, ‘ Steady, mates,’ to the boys up here, going on in his business, loving Lorraine a trifle harder than ever and keeping a weather eye out for town improvements. And did you hear about Hortense Quinby? She has killed herself —”

THE GRAY ANGELS

"I can wait an additional ten minutes," he conceded; "what about Hortense?"

"The boy she fancied was in love with her married his own sweetheart without delay and Hortense ended it in a foolish, mad fashion! You know how she was — how such women are —"

"Better out of the game," Hobart commented grimly.

"It touches me, not the tragedy itself, but the wasted life. . . . Bliss, do you know that nearly anything under the sun can be readjusted satisfactorily if people will only be honest regarding the facts concerning it? You call fame the violet crown and I call the stay-at-homes the gray angels; you say true artists are a vanguard — fine sounding names! But there is nothing new about it, is there? The idea of substituting one idea, theory or name for another to act as a rejuvenation of the brain and keep inspiration of the heart aglow began before the days of the pyramids! It is necessary to keep interest top hole and while the basis of it is almost hallucination and it may tend towards madness, the advantages do outweigh the tendencies. The name — the violet crown," she caressed the locket with her hands, "spurs me on to be a gray angel and that name has comforted Polly, Lorraine, Ernestine — and will many others. To belong to the vanguard of civilization — what strange intoxication is there in the title! — to battle with art-intrigues, — romantic phrase! I could never be without it. Bliss, what oddities human beings are —"

"And now, will you marry me?" he asked meekly.

"Lissa has failed to find a duke and the Hotel Particular is for sale; she staked everything on winning a title or a patroness. What will become of her?"

"Unfortunately life travels so much more swiftly than justice, I am afraid she may find another loophole of

THE GRAY ANGELS

escape . . . such people often do. . . . But will you marry me?"

"And I find myself growing as particular as Dorothy, wife of Sir Thomas Brown, who wished her 'shewes to be eythar pinke or blewe,' " she continued, "for I cannot —"

"I will not be cheated of another moment — answer me."

"You love me, that way?" she asked gravely.

"All ways. Surely, Miss Clergy's promise —"

"It is not that," she admitted, "for when she died she left me the message, 'Tell Thurley to use her own judgment.' It is not that."

"Then what — unless you don't love me?"

"A great disillusionment waits for you," she said honestly. "I am only a womanly hypocrite. I am not worthy of the violet crown nor the vanguard. I'm as simple hearted as Lorraine and far more stupid when you come to know the real me. . . . I have always loved you. I flirted only to see if it would not rouse the man of you to protest. I let Lissa influence me, harm my voice, color my notions, to see if you would not speak out as 'my man,' not my singing teacher, my master critic. . . . I tried in every avenue I could, Bliss, to make you care. Finally, you told me your vision and the greatest joy of it was not the vision but the thought you were sharing it with me. I told myself, 'at last I have something to work for, something with which I can tempt his interest — bait for his affection' — you see? So I set to work to live according to your ideals, not that I did not believe it, but because you, your own self, had told me of it and it was your fondest wish to see it realized. . . . Miss Clergy's death brought me the fortune . . . the

THE GRAY ANGELS

glorious ending of the war my opportunity . . . and so on. Now you say you love me. And I love you. But I warn you that all your visions and ideals mattered not so much as the fact of your sharing them with me, the nearest I had ever come to being essential to some one, belonging to some one — as I fancied in the old circus days when I played the bearded lady was my mother and the animals my brothers and sisters. F-funny, isn't it? Well, am I altogether too disappointing — clay toes will peep out but it is better you should see them now — not later." She waited his verdict, her head tilted defiantly and the glorious, blue eyes smiling bravely.

He did not hesitate. "Do you know a man's greatest joy is to discover the one he loves best of every one is not all gray angel, that he will not have to exist on the heights, even though he is prepared to break masculine precedent and do so, but a real woman with adorable weaknesses and amusing faults, spasms of 'intuition' and bothers about becoming hats and concern as to the said man's habit of not wearing overshoes — that she will not scorn a broad shoulder to weep on if the cook leaves unceremoniously, nor a bit of domination when it comes to selecting the right school for the boy or the number of frocks for the girl's coming out? Now, I've matched clay toes with you, most delightful lover's game in the world. . . . Let me whisper something else, Thurley; I was growing afraid of you. I thought I had better capture you while you were content to be merely a gray angel lest you become the shining, white spirit of the vanguard and such a happening be made impossible."

Without waiting for her approval, he took her in his arms.

Making the nightly rounds to see if the windows were

THE GRAY ANGELS

properly fastened, Ali Baba paused in the offing. He glanced up at the mistletoe under which he had happened to halt and smiled with sentimental satisfaction.

"Land sakes and Mrs. Davis," he chuckled, "I guess Miss Abby was dead to rights when she left it to Thurley's judgment!"

THE END

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

JUN 08 1988

JUN 23 1988

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 029 820 8

A
Y